

それは、

ありとあらゆる

ミステリー
怪異を詰め込んだ

ホラー
青春怪談小説。

フェリス

みつるぎ よし
美鶴木夜石は

怖がらない

一 肇

Hajime Ninomae

Illustration / 安倍吉俊

yoshitoshi ABe

“There are things that shouldn't be seen.”

Often said my late grandmother, and that was quite true.

I was drawn to the occult from childhood, and upon entering university, I learned the truth of those words by stepping many times into the edges of the netherworld. Ghosts — beings which no one can decisively determine whether they exist or not. The story that begins here revolves around stories brought forth by them.

And this story, it can also be said to be the story of it and I.

As its eyes glimmer in front of strangeness, as it breathes out words with a bedazzled expression, it warped the world that I always believed in. It made me anxious of whether the ground I stood on would shake. I would want to look over my shoulder just by listening, and I grew to fear whether someone were peeking from the dark shadow of the door.

Maybe it was because the words it spoke included truths about the other side. It included truths that only applied to the scant, grotesque, waning, dead ones.

Now, after it has disappeared, do I finally know that.

As grandmother said, it was a world that I should not have seen. It was a story that was not for the living person.

However.

However, I intend to speak of that.

I intend to speak about all of that.

Because if I don't — it wouldn't be able to rest in peace.

Because it, having lived on the edge of darkness, having struggled through the threshold of darkness, would not be able to live in peace.

Yes — I'll say it once more.

From here on, is a story that shouldn't be known.

case:01 The house that grants wishes

~flow

~fall

1

Hey, mother.

If the beings called ghosts existed in this world—

Would it ever be possible for someone to prove their existence such that no one anywhere could argue otherwise?

I think it would be impossible, no matter how much humanity evolves. On the flip side, it also means no one anywhere could prove irrefutably that they do not exist.

From that standpoint, to discuss whether ghosts exist or not is a complete waste of time. That's why people who can emerge victorious from such a discussion, must be people who can purely enjoy ghosts as a source of entertainment. Indeed, I fall under that group, and you could call me quite bluntly as an occult maniac.

Mother may not know, but this is quite a niche existence in the world — to be of my age and go ghost this, UMA that; I know that people laugh at people like me. But you know, there are plenty of things in the world that are inexplicable.

Yes—

For example, the house I'm living in.

This old, almost thirty-years-old building is by the side of the Tamagawa waterworks, and partly because it's located in such an odd place, has an incredibly low rent. When I came to Tokyo this spring, I looked for a cheap apartment, and found this place.

It takes ten minutes of biking to reach a convenience store. It's surrounded by darkness and covered by a thick copse, and because there are no streetlights in the area it's completely dark at night. However, I enjoy this old building. It was built like an old mountain cottage, as the first floor was a garage and the second and third floors were a blow-out, so it was more than luxurious for a person living alone. The kitchen was as cramped as a kitchenette, but it had a living room, a Japanese-style room, a bath, and even an atelier. From what I hear, an architect had designed it as a personal workplace. I liked it at first sight. Furthermore for a place with a bath to be just 30,000 yen in Tokyo Musashino was unthinkable rare, and it even came with an oral story that could not be ignored.

“This is a house that grants wishes.”

So said the smiling real estate agent who introduced this place to me.

“The architect who built this became famous, the illustrator who moved in became busy and moved closer to the city, and the young couple that was living here until last month gave birth to a baby, which led to this becoming open. You are quite lucky.”

After hearing that, who wouldn't immediately seal the deal?

So, I jumped at the opportunity. There was probably a feeling of superiority too, given that my colleagues at university pay over twice the rent and live in rabbit cages. In any case, I was quite pleased at how lucky a man I was with my first time living alone.

Yet — within a month I realized how big of a mistake that was.

I can hear sounds somewhere when I'm sleeping at night. The squeaking of something persistently attempting to open some old door. I'd assumed it was just some bad structuring somewhere, but I soon realized that it was odd that it always happened at 2AM. I tried going to the living room from my bedroom at the edge of the second floor. And the sound would stop. I thought, maybe it was coming from above, and went to the atelier on the third floor. But there was nothing that could be the source of the sound. I'd planned to eventually organize it to be cooler, but at the moment it was a bare environment with just my desk and a bookshelf. I looked around but the windows were all shut, so there was nothing to make a sound. After that I went to the toilet and the bath. However I could not find anything that could be connected to the sound. So I thought maybe I'm just hearing things and went to sleep again. But then the sound started again. Squeak, the sound of old wood groaning. I could also hear the sound of something scraping. It wasn't like a mouse or a cat. It was an eerie sound, like something trying to crawl out of somewhere dark after having been tormented for a long time.

Eventually that sound stopped seemingly echoing throughout the house, and felt like it was seeping through the atmosphere around my ear. As a result, I began keeping the lights on throughout the house and using earplugs when sleeping. However, the problem stopped being just sound.

It was about two weeks ago.

I found a decisive thing.

I found “七” (seven) carved into the wall of the landing of the stairs with something sharp.

I immediately checked the doors and windows around the house. But there didn't seem to have been anyone entering. I was probably terrified. It was a pretty big engraving, but I forced myself to think I had just never noticed it before. A few days later, though, I found near the bathtub “六” (six). Something sharp had carved it into the window sill. And then a week ago, I found near the toilet “五” (five), and even this easy-going person had to believe it.

Something was in this house.

And that this was some countdown.

I immediately jumped out of the house. I couldn't live in the house anymore. I hadn't made any close friends yet at university, so I lived in karaoke boxes and net cafes for several days. I couldn't talk about this to anyone. I didn't know any monks, nor any mediums. Then I realized. Right, maybe the people from "Ikaigabuchi" (Edge of the Netherworld) would be perfect for discussing this with! The colleagues of mine whom were also into the occult world may believe me.

And so—

Incidentally, they aren't suspicious people at all.

"No, "we" are plenty suspicious."

"... Huh?"

I recoiled at the sudden voice from above.

When I looked up, I saw Karasu's white face, and she was waving her hand.

"Yo, Nagi."

"K- Karasu. Since when were you there?"

I checked the time on my cell phone.

It was 10:30PM. There was still 30 minutes until the offline meeting taking place at 11.

"Right around when you began explaining 'the house that grants wishes' to your mother."

"... That's basically the start."

I complained, as I grumpily placed my stationery back my bag.

"Sorry, sorry. But you know, peeping is like our trait, you know?"

Said Karasu as she smiled cutely.

This was a family restaurant near Itsukai Ichikai road.

We were going to have an emergency offline meeting here with the members of an occult site I frequent. And of course, Karasu wasn't her real name. It was a handle that she used online. Just as I, Yamada Nagito, go by the name "Nagi", she went by "Karasu." This was the third time we'd met, but I still didn't know her real name. However, she was a veteran on the "Ikaigabuchi" site, and thus a big senior to me, who'd only begun looking at the site this spring.

Her appearance was as usual. A purplish velvet dress that reached her ankles, and below that was just a black camisole, or rather, her chest was completely bare. Her breasts looked like they would jump out at any time, which made looking at her awkward — however, this was her uniform of sorts.

“You're quite early, did you close shop early today?”

I asked.

“Pretty much. Fortunetellers don't have much to do when there are no customers.”

She took off the stole she was wearing and sat down across from me.

“But you know, to put it frankly.”

She played with the skull-shaped accessory shining at her breast as she looked at me.

“Your house probably has nothing to it.”

“What?”

“What was it — umm, right, schema.”

“Schema?”

“Some word used in cognitive science. If you keep thinking you're scared, then you start seeing faces in the ceiling, that sort of thing. Because you were hearing squeaking every day, you began seeing numbers from the scratches that always were in your house.”

”... S- seriously?”

“Seriously seriously. I mean, you came to Tokyo alone from super rural-ness in Shizuoka, and this is the first time you're living alone, right? And then you're living in an old, wooden house alone, so it's not too surprising. I used to live in a house that groaned and squeaked a lot, so I know how you feel. It's like the sound of saran wrapping so it's pretty discomforting.”

So she said, as she raised her hand to order beer from the waitress.

Well, wait then. If this was just me being a wuss, then what should I say to the occult veterans that were coming to the offline meeting? Would I get banned from the wonderful site for being an airhead in just one night?

“Ahh, don't worry about it.”

She laughed.

“We're a bunch of folk that love meeting and trading shady stories.”

“But, it shouldn't be that simple? There were about ten people coming to this meeting.”

And then Karasu said huh? and looked at me.

“You hadn't looked?”

“At what?”

“This meeting, I think over thirty people are showing up.”

... What?

I hurried accessed the “Ikaigabuchi” offline meeting board through my cell phone.

And then opening the “The house that grants wishes / investigation thread” and was taken aback.

“You're right. Why'd the number suddenly rocket? Are that many people interested in the 'house that grants wishes?’”

“Unfortunately, not at all. See, even the regulars 'Suu' and 'Zippo' are coming to the meeting, right? They wouldn't move for some mere horror tale.”

... Some horror tale.

She laughed at the expression I made as she plucked the phone from my hand and then played with it. And then she turned the screen to me.

“This. The fourth poster, going by the name 'Yoishi.' I think this many people are showing up because this one announced their participation.”

“Who is 'Yoishi'?”

“No idea.”

Said Karasu with a grin as she pulled out a cigarette. She lit the cigarette using a worn, slender lighter, and after blowing out a puff of smoke, quietly whispered.

“Those that meet Yoishi die seven days later.”

“What?”

“There's more. Yoishi isn't a living person. Offline meetings that Yoishi attends end in terror. What else was there?”

“W- What is that?”

“Something like an urban legend that started being whispered around 'Ikaigabuchi.' Yet no one's actually met Yoishi. No one knows if Yoishi is some old man, or even what gender they are. However, everyone who attends a meeting that Yoishi goes to remains silent. The entire thread disappears. The participants stop going to 'Ikaigabuchi', or—”

“Or?”

“They die.”

Her low whisper felt like ice-cold water splashing down the back of my neck. On the other side, Karasu happily received her glimmering cup of beer, and exclaimed,

“Guah, delicious!”

With a lackadaisical tone.

“But those... are just rumors, right?”

I asked, and she laughed, that's right.

“So basically, even if 'the house that grants wishes' is a miss, there's the hope of 'Yoishi', so everyone's gathering for fun. So you don't have to fret about it any.”

She said, but I still felt mixed emotions.

Until now, until today, I was trembling with fear alone, unable to go home. And then I suggested today's offline meeting in the hopes of getting the opinions of the veterans of “Ikaigabuchi.” Having the story blown off immediately as my misunderstanding wasn't sufficient to quell my fears.

“However — if Yoishi has gotten interested, might 'the house that grants wishes' be real?”

“Who knows-. I'm just interested in seeing how Yoishi-kun's appearance changes a horror story that doesn't interest me into something more eerie.”

... Doesn't interest.

“If it still bothers you, 'Ikaigabuchi' has a page for investigating haunted areas. You can request an investigation. Although I still think you'll just end up being laughed at.”

She laughed, as she quickly finished her beer.

Indeed, the “Ikaigabuchi” site did routinely checked out haunted areas around the country regardless of fame.

After investigation, haunted areas were graded on a scale of A to D, with A being called the most dangerous of spots. This rating was very unique, in that famed areas such as Masakado Kubiduka and Iwainari were given a D rank by “Ikaigabuchi” — in other words, they were rated as the lowest level of danger. Supposedly it was because it had become an area that was “evenly split”, as humans and ghosts treated each other with respect.

On the other hand, places given an A rank were often unknown to the common populace. Places such as crime scenes that involved murders brought forth by thick emotions such as infatuation and jealousy, isolated locales of death by seniors who maintained fanatic delusions, and so on. They say those places serve as lightning rods for souls that resented the current world, souls that had lost personalities and simply become clumps of malicious intent, far beyond saving.

As I thought such things, Karasu had begun peering intently at my face.

“Hey, Nagi-kun.”

“Yes?”

“You have the mark of a meeting.”

“Yes?”

“And this is— a girl.”

... Seriously?

My expression loosened at her words.

“Can you tell me a little more?”

“Hmm.”

She began playing with the skull-shaped accessory near her breast as she continued.

“How should I put it, it's a very dense meeting. Like two souls previously split are reuniting. But-”

She said, seemingly looking through me and at a different world.

“It's hard to say if meeting this girl will actually result in happiness for you.”

“What's that?”

“And furthermore... huh? Wait, isn't she dead?”

..... Hey.

Isn't that like, being possessed?

You've gotta be kidding me, I thought, but I also remembered that she would tell me such ominous things every time we met. Previously she'd told me I had bicycle luck and then I got hit by a mama-cycle on the way back, and then she'd told me I had gold fortune and was happy but then I stepped on a gold-colored thumbtack at home. In other words, she was very good at presenting unfortunate things in a way that you can't tell it's unfortunate, which is an important skill for a fortuneteller, I suppose.

“You know, Karasu, if you're a fortuneteller, shouldn't you also tell people how to avoid misfortune?”

I asked.

“But it's up to the person whether to think of something as unfortunate.”

She stuck out her tongue in a cute way, and then shouted to the employee passing by, “Another beer, please!”

As I sat there watching over her in a vexed manner, the door chime sounded repeatedly, and suspicious-looking people filed in one after another. Seeing how they were coming over after noticing Karasu, I deduced they were people attending the offline meeting.

“Yo yo Karasu, as beautiful as always.”

“Long time no see to you too, Maru.”

“I'm so excited.”

“We have such karmic dispositions.”

As such conversations continued, my seat in the back of the family restaurant slowly became surrounded by activity. Every now and then I would see a familiar face, but most I had never seen before. I'd actively been participating in offline meetings in Tokyo, and that I continued seeing new faces en masse each time made me realize how deep the world of the occult was.

Just after eleven, the group that had gathered at the back of the family restaurant, with the odd interest, had passed thirty. Or rather, I'd picked the family restaurant figuring there'd be ten, so this was pretty big transgression. The looks from the waitresses passing awkward smiles at me hurt.

“Are there more coming?”

I quietly asked Karasu, who was engaging in friendly chat with other attendees, and she was a bit blushed as she responded, it's way too late now.

“There are a bunch of people who show up without saying anything, so there'll probably be a few more.”

“That's problematic.”

“This might scare away 'Yoishi', too.”

She commented lightly, but—

This might really be troublesome.

“So, which one's Yoishi?”

As expected, not even an hour passed before the conversation blew past “the house that grants wishes.”

The countless occult veterans crammed into the family restaurant each looked around them, frantically looking for the accursed “Yoishi.”

“Alright, I propose introducing ourselves!”

Said the middle-aged man going by the handle “Professor”, with his blushed face.

Seeing empty beer mugs scattered around his table revealed how drunk this person was. And then in response, others chanted “yeah lets do it” and one by one people stood up and gave a greeting. As at least half the participants were getting quite drunk, people began feeling less like occult maniacs and more of a complete drinking party.

“First! I'm Professor! My preferred area of occult are stories from people of post-trauma ethnicity!”

“Second! I'm Rabbit. I love folklore about Ryoumen Sukuna-sama!”

“Third! I'm Harley! I get excited by stuff related to OOPARTS! At the moment I'm researching Voynich Manuscripts!”

What're they going first second third for? And why are Rabbit and Harley both jumping on the wagon?

The occult maniacs were very playful, and so they began introducing themselves one by one. With incredibly loud volume. I alone seemed to be taking the brunt of the customers' glares from the rest of the restaurant.

“Seventh, I'm Karasu!”

When she energetically stood up, a round of applause arose, and in response she began socializing every which way, so I gave up. Come to think of it, it could be said that every offline meeting for “Ikaigabuchi” turns out this way, and so it's like a trait of the site.

“Here, Nagi-kun. It's your turn next.”

Urged by Karasu, I begrudgingly stood up.

“Umm, eight. I'm Nagi. I'm a university student.”

“What type of occult do you like?”

“Uhh, I like anything wonderful... but right now things related to ghosts.”

When I lightly responded to a question that had been flung at me, people began shouting “you're too tightly-wound!” “you need to drink more!” and someone ordered beer for me. Man, I'm still 18. I'm underage. I can't drink.

“Don't worry, don't worry. I'll drink it. Just act like you're drinking and they'll be appeased.”

Laughed Karasu as she smacked my butt with her palm.

Well in any case, the thirty or so people introduced themselves like this—

And the conclusion.

There was no one here who went by the handle Yoishi.

“Huh, so they didn't show up.”

“I showed up to see Yoishi.”

“Is anyone faking their handle?”

Said people one by one, but given that most had never seen other and that offline meetings weren't particularly rare, it was hard to figure if anyone was lying.

“Well, since we've all gathered, can we discuss what 'the house that grants wishes' is-”

I began, but “Suu” spoke over me.

“I think.”

An old veteran of “Ikaigabuchi” who managed a liquor store and liked collecting things like the arms of tengu and the shell of kappa, if I remember correctly.

“Yoishi might be a different handle of Krishna.”

I was sighing, but reacted to that name.

“Hmm, that would make sense.”

Someone responded.

“If we summarize the rumors involving Yoishi — umm, if you deal with Yoishi you'll have a terrifying end. Yoishi isn't a living person. Those that meet Yoishi die seven days later. Something like that? But we've never heard any specifics of anyone dying, and maybe certain threads were disappearing because Krishna was secretly joining the horror area investigations? Is what I think, anyways.”

I see, nodded even Karasu.

“Krishna hasn't been showing up lately either, so that'd make sense.”

“W- wait, please.”

I chimed in. “Krishna, as in the administrator of 'Ikaigabuchi', Krishna? Everyone's met him?”

“Met him, or rather, he's always showed up to meetings before.”

“But he's not here today?”

“You want to see him?”

“Of course.”

The reason I became interested in the site “Ikaigabuchi” in the first place was being the person named Krishna was so fascinating. Of course, part of it was that I was interested in the occult from the start, but there was a different sort of attraction with “Ikaigabuchi.”

That was apparent, for instance, by looking at the odd words at the top of the page, “Things that bother people also bother ghosts.” From the start, “Ikaigabuchi” was a site intended to sooth matters between people and ghosts. Most people can't see ghosts. That's why, regardless of our lack of ill intent, that we probably bother ghosts more than they do us was a perspective that was both fresh and unique. And as I read articles about reknown horror areas on “Ikaigabuchi”, my conviction deepened. Each article was filled with care toward ghosts, taking care to show respect toward both the living and the dead.

“I always wondered. Why are people always afraid of ghosts? Perhaps some ghosts play tricks on people, while other ghosts say come on, stop it, and are stepping in and intervening, yet no one ever thinks of that possibility. Maybe that sort of order is maintained by ghosts, and is why the vast majority of people live without ever being bothered by the supernatural.”

That paragraph struck a chord with me, in particular.

These words moved me, when I'd just arrived in Tokyo and hadn't met anyone I could call a friend. I realized more than ever that people were connected to other people through candor. It gave me courage that I could make do in Tokyo, where it's said that peoples' relationships with other people are often weak and diluted, where people try to avoid needless interaction with other people as much as possible. That was actually why I began participating in the site.

I became attracted to the person named Krishna by their daily updates of the wonderful. His deep, yet wide-ranging knowledge of the occult. His in-depth, cool writing style. The truth that could be felt from each and every word. These were all things I lacked, and were packed with things that my soul needed right then. I'd gotten to the point where I felt like Krishna had become like my brother and father in Tokyo.

And if I could—

I wanted Krishna to investigate “the house that grants wishes” himself.

“H- h- how old is Krishna? What kind of person is he?”

“Nagi-kun you're stuttering.” “Calm down.” “Here, have a drink.”

Undeterred by the interruptions by Suu and others, I rephrased my question.

“Please, tell me. How could I meet him?”

However, the response to my question was an awkward silence by the thirty.

“I think he won't show up at an offline meeting again.”

“Why?”

“Some things happened-”

“Some things?”

“Well, eventually. You'll find out. Leave it be for now.”

I only received vague responses like that.

What broke the silence at the family restaurant was Zippo, who I think worked as a programmer.

“Um... I oppose that opinion.”

“That opinion?”

Asked Karasu, and Zippo pushed his thick glasses up and slowly answered.

“That, Yoishi and Krishna are the same person, that thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“Actually, I know of someone who's met Yoishi at an offline meeting.”

“Really?”

The gathering immediately rose in unison.

“What sort of person?” “How old?” “Guy? Girl?” “Which offline?”

They all asked, and Zippo quietly answered.

“The offline meeting was for an investigation of an abandoned hospital in the Tama prefecture, about half a year ago.”

“And, what was Yoishi like?”

“Umm, well... I don't know.”

“You don't know?”

Karasu asked, and Zippo swallowed once before answering.

“Because he's hospitalized.”

“Hospitalized?”

“Psychiatric ward.”

And with that, the excited gathering returned to silence.

It was as if something heavy had descended upon the seats.

“Hospitalized in a psychiatric ward, is that Yoishi's fault?”

Asked Suu, and Zippo slowly shook his head.

“I don't know. But even after regaining consciousness, all he mumbled is Yoishi. That's why I came to this meeting, because if Yoishi came, I wanted to ask, what happened at that offline meeting?”

Everyone fell silent when Zippo stopped speaking.

And then the family restaurant was filled once again with stories of Yoishi. “Come to think of it”, was the type of statement preceding conversations as one after another tales of Yoishi leaked out from people.

If I were to summarize such topics—

It seemed “Yoishi” infrequently appeared on the “Ikaigabuchi” forum. Its appearance was not common, but whenever it showed up, it would post in almost every thread, providing opinions on everything, regardless of how maniacal the topic. Given the time of appearance, Yoishi could be imagined as an occult maniac that was sitting in front of a computer almost 24 hours a day. It had knowledge of the supernatural to rival Krishna, but their posts showed no signs of sharing the ghost love that defined Krishna. If anything, they could be described as more eerie — as if a dead person had eerily joined the internet.

“Maybe the rumors that Yoishi isn't a living person, they might be true after all.”

Mumbled Jersey, who said he was a writer for a magazine.

“Remember that thread that popped up some time ago, I'm a ghost but do you have any questions?”

“Ahh, the one where IP traces and PC and hosts all came up empty, so people wondered whether it was real?”

“I'm of the opinion that ethereal forms have good synergy with computers and digital equipment. Because you know, brainwaves are weak electrical signals, too.”

“You do hear a lot of tales of ghosts writing online.”

“Then, that Yoishi—”

Mumbled Suu, in a summarizing way.”

“We can't see it — but is it already here?”

Those words sent a chill down my spine.

I looked around the brightly-lit store.

It wasn't just me - it seemed like everyone felt something cold.

After that, the gathering seemed to decide to avoid talking about ghosts. Gradually, seats became arranged by topic as people broke off into their areas of interest.

As the host of the offline meeting, I wanted to bring back the original topic, but I was certain no one remembered anything about my house. Furthermore, Suu was telling fascinating, eerie stories, and that was too interesting to pass up. An box bought from an antique store that could not be opened, ghost stories involving paper money found behind a painting on a hotel wall, a laughing girl who spoke often to a doll — each provided entertainment that could leave you sleepless when alone at night.

Everyone forgot about time as they enjoyed the endless flow of occult discussions—

And at around 1AM, the offline meeting dispersed.

2

“Wait a second!”

I chased Karasu as she flagged a taxi while glancing at the “Ikaigabuchi” members scattering in small groups.

“What about my house. 'The house that grants wishes.'”

And then the useless fortuneteller waved her hand with a completely flush face.

“No problem no problem. It's that, um, uh-hh, schema. And what else, I was going to tell you something else but- hahahah, I forgot-.”

“What do you mean 'forgot'...”

“Don't worry! You have the mark of a meeting! See ya!”

She smacked my back and then happily jumped into the stopped taxi.

I stood there dumbfounded as I saw the taxi run off.

”... Hmm.”

I wondered if it was alright to go home.

To that house – “the house that grants wishes.”

I walked toward the train station using the main street, dragging along the mama-cycle that I'd bought really cheap online for commuting to school.

Tokyo was filled with people even late at night. In particular, the area around the train station near my house was close to many universities, so there seemed to be no difference in the amount of people milling about from noon to night. Right around where I could see the station, I almost ran into a pair of girls, and apologized. One shot me a “who's this punk?” look, but the other smiled and said “I'm sorry.” I apologized once more. That was all there was to it, but it filled my heart with joy. Indeed – a fateful meeting was lying in wait for me. And a girl, no less. This might be good. The bizarre events tormenting me at that house must surely be a build-up for the happiness that awaited. In the future, I would look back at it and laugh it off.

I felt less burdened when I thought of it that way.

And this way I wouldn't have to move out. Moving costs would be painful for me, given that I was receiving no aid from home.

“The offline meeting was fun too, I can't keep complaining.”

I mumbled to myself, and I finally straddled the bike.

I turned completely around, and decided to return home for the first time in a few days.

“No one that came to the offline meeting today said anything about 'the house that grants wishes.' If you look at it from another angle, it means it can't possibly be a ghost incident. It's a bit shameful as the original poster, but it's all good in the end, right?”

What would have happened if I'd dragged people over to my house, and it turned out that there were no ghosts? I'd just be a laughingstock.

Having finished arming myself with logic, I faced the soft, comforting night breeze and powered the pedals. I'd recovered to the point where I may have even hummed.

However–

I noticed it when I was about to re-enter the main street from the arcade in front of the train station.

There was a strange, abnormal feeling on the back of my left foot. It was like I was constantly stepping on gum, so I stopped my bike, and took off my sneaker right there.

And then I lifted my left foot a bit, looked at the sole, and froze.

All of my good feelings were extinguished, and I felt my blood freezing.

On the back of my sneaker–

Was engraved the number ”四” (four).

“Damn it, what the hell schema.”

The countdown was continuing.

I pushed the mama-cycle along with mostly a half-step, and every person passing gave me a strange look owing to my frantic look, but I paid them no heed.

I threw away the sneaker with ”四” engraved on the spot. I couldn't continue wearing such an eerie thing. The cold of the concrete and the scattered pebbles pierced my feet through my socks, but I didn't care.

Why, when, was ”四” carved into the back of my sneaker?

What was going to happen when the countdown ended? And how would I be able to escape from this terror?

I had no idea, but in any case, I kept running.

People in fancy clothing looked at me and laughed, but I didn't care. I just wanted somewhere with a warm atmosphere.

Where.

Where would that be—

Eventually I found a discount shop open late into the night after passing through the arcade, and I jumped in. A stupidly bright theme song was playing in the background. The mass of products were incredibly cheap, and I sang along with the simple, repetitive melody. Flamboyantly-dressed girls avoided me as I stood there, leaning against a shelf holding cosmetics and mumbling to myself. An employee asked me, “Are you unwell?” and I finally realized that my left foot, which was only covered by socks, was throbbing. When I looked, perhaps I'd stepped on a shard of glass on the way, as I saw that the socks had been cut and bloodied. I bought bandages, socks, and the cheapest sneaker, and cleaned the wound in the bathroom. I cleaned the back of my foot, placed the bandage, and wore the new socks. The cheap sneaker had a shoddy design and wasn't very comfortable, but it was better than being barefoot. It was an unnecessary expense, but I felt comforted. I was afraid of being in the bathroom alone so I returned to the inside of the store, and took deep breaths as I wandered around the store as if window-shopping.

— What should I do now?

I thought, but could come up with no answer.

At some point I'd just begun standing in front of a show window absentmindedly, and the employee from before asked if anything was wrong again, so I left the store. There was no helping it, so I began heading toward the net cafe I'd been using before, but it was already full. I peeked into the nearby karaoke box, but there was even a line spilling out onto the street. I tried wandering around several stores but they were all the same. Come to think of it, it was Saturday night. There would be no openings until the first train.

However, I couldn't think of any other place to go.

I wandered around the station while dragging my bike, and the police would shoot me suspicious looks. I almost felt like it would be more comforting to be arrested, but some level of common sense remained in me, so I turned back to the main street.

The headlights of cars on Itsukaichi Street illuminated me as they passed by. Normally the cars just looked like fuel-consuming devices, but today I felt consoled by them. It was invigorating to look upon things that could be scientifically explained.

However—

I may have been at my limits.

This was no different from being homeless.

I had no one I was intimate with enough in Tokyo, where the light never dims. I had no place to go. And I was running low on funds. I spontaneously looked at the night sky, but just as there were no clouds, there were also no stars. It was just an obsidian dimension that stretched on as if painted.

Perhaps I could call my sister and borrow some money in the morning. And then go back to Shizuoka. Tokyo was too much for me, which was something humiliating to say, but this was just too unexpected. I'd imagine most people would have trouble with such a case, too. Mother, I'm sorry. You supported me so much in coming to Tokyo.

Then—

I saw a strong light at the end of the night street.

When I looked up, I realized I'd come back to the family restaurant.

“I see... this was also open twenty-four hours.”

That was enough to make me feel like I'd found a million allies, and my knees almost buckled.

The drink bar here was cheaper than the net cafe, and there were plenty of people about due to it being Saturday night. I should have just stayed here from the start.

“Hahahaha.”

I laughed to myself dryly, and I must have been very hard to approach with how I looked.

Anyways, I left my mama-cycle at the bicycle lot for the family restaurant, and then was about to enter when I recoiled.

There was something even more bizarre that made me not want to get any closer.

Outside the big, glass window to the store.

Inside the fern thicket that seemed to have been planted to cover the store.

Was a girl dressed in full black.

She wore a black long-coat even though it was spring, and her long hair that stretched down her back and her skirt and her boots were also pure black. Yet her skin was abnormally white. And she was crouched in the darkness, so it looked like only her face was floating.

... Wh- what is she doing?

She was standing in the middle of the thicket and almost pressing her face against the glass as she stared into the store.

It was so creepy I was about to back off.

But then she slowly turned to face me. Her face was shockingly white, and the face was perfectly aligned. She was so perfect that I felt like saying she must have been a construct, like a giant Bisque Doll that had accidentally been left there – that's the impression she gave.

A night-colored girl.

Unexpectedly, those words popped into my head.

Those were the colors of the girl's eyes. Maybe it was because of the lighting, but it felt like an inordinately large proportion of her eyes were taken by her irises, and that under her long eyelashes they seemed to have a jet black glimmer. Below her straight-cut front hair, they shone a dark color as they gazed upon me.

”... Are you.”

My mouth naturally spoke.

”... Yoishi?”

The girl silently nodded.

Yoishi isn't a living person. Those that meet Yoishi die seven days later. Offline meetings that Yoishi attends end in terror.

What I'd heard earlier floated around my head as I stared at the girl in front of me.

Seven glasses were laid out on the table in front of Yoishi, ranging from iced coffee to cola to orange juice to Japanese tea, creating her own drink bar.

“Um, aren't you supposed to just take one at a time?”

I said to her in an exasperated tone, but she replied.

“As long as I drink everything there should be no problem.”

And she kept her eyes on the glasses as she drank one after another.

She drank orange juice, then iced coffee, and then warm Japanese tea, cola. And she faithfully repeated the order a number of times, sometimes adding Rooibos tea and black tea and melon soda as an accent. I didn't know if there was meaning to the order, but when she did it, it felt like some sort of traditional religious ritual, which was odd.

I took a look again at the girl who went by Yoishi.

She was probably still in high school. I realized when looking at her under a brighter condition that she had immense beauty. However, the problem was her eyes. Those eyes, that seemed like glass beads, seemed to be looking somewhere and yet also seemed to be looking nowhere. It felt as if she did not share the same world, creating a special barrier about her. Hers was not like that of a princess and her high perch, rather if anything, like that of a witch's apprentice.

“Hey.”

I asked the girl dressed in black, as she busily rifled through the drinks.

“Why didn't you come to the offline meeting?”

“I was there.”

“No, but, when everyone was around, you didn't come.”

“I was there. Right there the whole time.”

She pointed toward the other side of the window, where I'd first found Yoishi – in other words, in the bush outside the store.

... There? With her face pressed against the glass?

“Then, what. From 11 until now – you were there the whole time?”

Yes, she nodded, and as I started at her pale face, I thought.

This girl–

Is she what you'd call psychotic?

It was already past 2AM. To stick to glass for 3 hours from 11PM must have crept out the employees. When I turned back toward her, a different waitress from before was saying something to Yoishi. Her expression was contorted in an extremely mean manner, in a much more contemptuous manner than they'd shown me. I stood up, having felt like I'd seen something detestable. I immediately walked toward them, declared “I want a drink bar as well,” and then headed straight toward the counter to grab a drink. I don't know why I felt so irritated. Probably, it was because I'd felt like I'd been laughed at, as a fellow occult-lover.

I filled my glass to the brim with ice, then pressed the button for iced coffee.

– Now then, what to do from here out.

As I watched the hot iced coffee melt through the ice, I thought.

I could not go home, and the countdown continued. Furthermore, I had run into the heresy-class occult girl from “Ikaigabuchi.” And now, for some reason, I'm alone with her at a family restaurant late at night. In a way, it was comforting that I was not alone, but given that it was an occult girl with strange urban legends attached to her, I was left with complex emotions.

“You like bad coffee?”

When I returned to my seat, Yoishi said that.

“What?”

“I asked if you like bad coffee. The coffee here is unsatisfactory.”

I looked at her seven glasses again and noticed that only the iced coffee had hardly been sipped.

“Information that you can gather beforehand should be processed before you act.”

Yoishi's neat logic-filled words annoyed me, so I replied with some nastiness.

“Then allow me to gather information. Why did you come to today's offline meeting?”

“Because I was interested.”

“In 'the house that grants wishes'? Why are you interested in that house? The sounds are probably just structural groans, and the engravings might just be my mistake, right?”

I said exactly what Karasu told me, in a self-depreciating manner, and Yoishi simply said, “of course,” without any hint of retorting.

“Then, why—”

“When I read about that house on the forum – I felt a bit of an oddity.”

Her low, whispering tone gave me goosebumps.

“There are countless stories of oddities overflowing on the internet, but most of them are fake. Real ones, though, they have a scent that cannot be hidden.”

Something hot bubbled forth from the bottom of my stomach at those words.

Having a psycho believe you isn't really something to be pleased about, but I was, to be frank, happy that there was someone that would finally listen to the source of my fears. Indeed. That place is real. I was in shambles already, as the bottom of my shoe had been carved into.

“Hey, what is that? Is it a ghost? Are you the type that can see them? What do you mean by having a scent that cannot be hidden?”

I couldn't stop myself from blurting out questions, and Yoishi stared at a glass of orange juice as she flatly answered.

“First question first. It may not be a ghost.”

“What?”

“Next question. It's not that I can see everything. Final question. A feeling. Real abnormalities always have a strange sense of not-fitting-together.”

Yoishi switched out of her previous, dazed posture and began talking.

“Strange phenomena happen. People related to it become afraid. When you investigate, you find out that someone committed suicide there – I won't say that such neatly-placed-together stories are all fake. However, the real, fun ghost stories surpass such things. There's a feeling, as if something important has been skipped over. Being able to fill in the gap is the single theory of the other side.”

“In- in other words, what? What is that eerie sound that keeps happening at my house? Why are numbers being written, and why are they always going down? What happens to me when the numbers run out—”

I'd subconsciously stood up as I shouted.

”– What's going to happen to me!?”

The store went silent, and everyone was looking at me.

Embarrassed a bit, I sat back down. However, I couldn't figure out what was going on. I didn't know what to do anymore. I was a bit ashamed of myself, and scratched my head, when Yoishi quietly mumbled.

”**You** are the one that posted that.”

I looked up, and Yoishi's cold, dark irises were mysteriously glimmering.

I nodded, and explained what had just happened.

That ”**四**” had already arrived, and that it had been carved onto the bottom of the sneakers I had been wearing myself. I explained that while trembling.

“How does someone carve that? Did something possess me all the way from home?”

I was almost in tears when I asked – and then I recoiled.

Yoishi's eyes, which were once like glass beads, had seemed to harbor life.

And then, she suddenly placed a finger to my nose, and said.

“Hey, close your eyes.”

“Huh?”

Her pretty face peered into me, gazing into my eyes. Her face had come so close to me that, to be honest, my heart started racing.

“Why do I have to close my eyes?”

“Just do it.”

My heart thumping, I did as she said. I closed my eyes tightly. It felt like some inappropriate imagination had drifted in, so I frantically warded that away.

“Imagine.”

Her lips seemed to move at the back of my eyes, commanding.

“You are standing at the entrance of your house.”

Her frosty, yet somewhat kind voice forced me to stand before my house.

“As detailed as you can, imagine yourself standing at the entrance of your house.”

As if controlled by those words, I imagined myself standing in that house in the darkness.

Black – the sharp image of that mountain cottage.

The reddish-brown roof, the mountain cottage, the atelier that an architect had built for himself. The walls were faded in a nice fashion, and covered by vines to the second floor, the white paint had slightly chipped off of the wooden window sills. The first floor was all a garage, and the second and third floors were built as living quarters. It had no kitchen, my rented house of 30000 yen. And at night, it began making a strange sound, and the next morning a number would be carved somewhere—

My legs began trembling, but I held them down with my hands.

“Alright. When you've imagined it, place your hand on the doorknob.”

”... Alright.”

“Now, open the door.”

I opened the door. My shoes were sprawled out on the foyer. When I'd rushed out of the house, I'd kicked the leather shoes out of the way. But my feet refused to go further. I felt someone in the house, even though no one should be in it. The thick, sticky air seemed to make me feel that way. No. I didn't want to step forward, even if this was just my imagination.

Seemingly noticing my emotions, Yoishi said, whispering.

“Don't worry. Slowly move in. Take off your shoes as usual, and step in. When you step in, I don't care what order, but open every window in your house. Neatly, one by one, without leaving a single one.”

... Window? Why windows?

I thought that, but I heeded her. I went by the window in the living room, unlocked it and opened it. And then from there to the Japanese-style room I was using as a bedroom. I unlocked and opened the window. Then from the Japanese-style room to the bathroom. Opened. To the bath. Opened. Then I progressed to the third floor. There were two on the third floor: by the veranda and next to my desk. I unlocked and opened both.

”... I'm done.”

“And now, close the windows in reverse order.”

”... Huh?”

“Close them in order from the last one you opened.”

Having no other choice, I did as she said.

The window on the third floor by the desk. Veranda. Then down to the second floor, and uhh, the bath, toilet, Japanese-style room, living quarters.

I closed them all.

“Yes, done. Now open your eyes.”

Said Yoishi's voice, and I opened my eyes and the light from the bright, fluorescent lamps flooded into my eyes. I had paid no heed to them before, but the bright pop music from within the store also came into my ears. Right, this was a family restaurant. I rubbed my eyes strongly, when Yoishi asked me.

“How was it?”

“What do you mean how was it, what was the point of this?”

“Was there anyone in the rooms?”

My hairs stood at those words.

... There was.

That was on the landing on the stairs between the second and third floors. A middle-aged man wearing ashen-colored clothing seemed to have been there. immobile, with an empty-ish face, he watched over my every action with his staring eyes. I could never look straight at him, but he was always appearing at the edge of my sight—

”... There was, wasn't there?”

Yoishi's black eyes dazzled with some sort of happiness.

“Was it someone you know?”

”... I don't know. I'd never seen him before.”

No... could that be? To imagine someone that I'd never met before. That house still remained thick within my mind, as Yoishi's joyful voice echoed through the image.

“Scared?”

I looked, and Yoishi had come close enough to me that I could feel her breath.

“Hey, are you feeling scared right now?”

... Scared.

Or rather, your eyes that look like they'll eat everything scare me.

“Tell me more. What kind of person?”

I took a deep breath, and explained as I tried to stop myself from trembling.

A gray, worn suit. I didn't remember a necktie. The suit seemed a bit big, but that may have been because the man was thinned. He had white hair, and I couldn't remember the face. The hair was grown a bit long, without any care. He wore black shoes.

And Yoishi was rubbing her chin, going hmm.

After some silence and glancing about at nothing with her eyes, she looked at me once more.

“Hey, how about we go?”

”– What?”

“To your house. Now.”

3

Ahh, why did this happen?

It was a night with a beautiful moon. And I was dangerously pedaling the mama-cycle.

I passed through the residential area to the north of the train station near the family restaurant, then continued west along the grooved river. The grooved river was called Shimokawa and was one of the rivers that flowed into the Tamagawa waterworks. This river gradually curved northeast, and headed toward the area I lived. Every time my bike bounced off the bumpy road, Yoishi's body pressed against mine as she sat behind me. I could feel the slight inflation of her breasts on my back through my jersey, and every so often I had misplaced thoughts of how we looked like a nice couple.

However, what was hanging onto my back was a psycho girl dressed entirely in black. Her arms wrapped around my waist were oddly cold. Aren't girls supposed to have a higher body temperature? Like, soft, warm, and with a nice scent. However, I could hardly feel any heat from Yoishi, who was sitting at the rear of the seat of my bicycle. If it were to turn out that only I could see her, I wouldn't even be surprised. That's how far away from a date this night-time bicycle rendezvous was.

The residential area became distant, and in its stead came fields. The city lights became dim, and it felt like the number of stars increased, and the scent of grass became stronger. We were much closer to my home.

“Quite rural.”

“Shut it.”

That was my response to Yoishi's line, after some period of quiet.

“I don't mean it in a bad way. I didn't realize Musashino still had such a place.”

“That's why I figured the rent would be low.”

I vented a bit of my feelings of self-deprecation.

Houses became very scarce, and after passing by several old temples, we entered an area dense with trees. By following this narrow path, we would arrive at that house.

“To be honest, I don't want to go at night.”

When I said that behind me.

“It only happens at night, so we should go at night.”

Yoishi readily replied. A very sound argument.

For a while we remained wordless, until Yoishi asked.

“What was your wish?”

“Huh?”

“Because you're painstakingly living in 'the house that grants wishes,' aren't you?”

Painstakingly, or rather I just had no money.

“Nothing special. I hoped that my family's business would go well, that's all.”

I answered.

“Surprisingly, you think of your family.”

Yoishi commented without giving any trace of emotion.

Surprisingly is pretty harsh, I began replying, but then we saw that house beyond the black forest.

“That.”

“Yeah.”

Looking over it again, I was amazed at how I rented such a house. Looking at it now, no matter who looked at it, it looked completely like a haunted house.

As I slid the mama-cycle into the first-floor garage, Yoishi jumped off the rear seat of the bike. When she pressed the switch on the steel column, the light on the ceiling of the garage turned on. That was all it took to reduce my fear. Yoishi began walking about on her own, looking at the building from several angles.

“A magnificent building.”

She said, and then she began walking ahead of me. She climbed the stairs to the entrance on the second floor. Not having any other choice, I placed one foot on the stairs, but could go no further. As for Yoishi, she quickly climbed the stairs, opened the door without permission, and glanced inside. Ahh, right. Now that I think about it, I flew out without locking the door. That means I'd left it unlocked for several days, which was very careless of me.

I was just looking up from the bottom of the stairs. It was pretty shameful, but I'm the one that experienced the fear. I'd say it's perfectly normal for an animal to not want to get any closer unless safety is ensured.

“How is it?”

“Dark.”

Well of course.

And with that, Yoishi quickly went inside. I was afraid of being left at the bottom of the stairs, so I rushed after Yoishi. When I opened the entrance door, the inside was already lit with electricity. Yoishi stood straight next to the lamp switch, glancing around from the ceilings to the walls. Light is great. I felt calmed just by it being bright to the point of not knowing whether those creepy happenings were reality.

When I was about to take off my shoes at the foyer, I saw that Yoishi's knee-high boots had already been taken off neatly. She may surprisingly be well-to-do, I thought, but then it struck me.

That come to think of it, we hadn't even properly introduced ourselves.

“Hey, it's belated, but.”

I turned toward Yoishi and said.

“I go by 'Nagi' online. My real name is Yamada Nagito. I'm a freshman at university this spring.”

She didn't turn around; she nodded and then said.

“I'm Yoishi.”

“Isn't that a handle?”

“Wrong. My surname is Mitsurugi. Not that it matters.”

– Mitsurugi, Yoishi.

She continued being odd. She used her real name online, and then didn't care for her surname.

”[color text 五 c red](#)' was on the wall of the toilet?”

However, as if to say that it was a waste of time, she asked that, and so I pointed to the far end of the second floor. Yoishi silently went there. Without hesitating, she opened the door, turned on the light, and peered in.

I quietly followed.

“Right? It looks like the letter '五' right? It's not a schema, right?”

I said to Yoishi's back.

“You know of words such as schema?”

She replied, as if being condescending.

“Well I mean I am an occult maniac.”

That was a lie. It was information I just received.

“In a state where you've received a specific set of information, when you see a meaningless figure, your brain follows the information to create a suitable schematic– that is schema in cognitive science, but this is without a doubt 'color text 五 c red.' Even I see it that way.”

Yoishi said, not caring for my words, as she traced her fingers over the engraving.

Well, it wasn't like determining that it wasn't schema solved anything. If anything it made things worse. If this was truly a deliberately-written '五', then someone wrote that in this house – or rather, something, and that was in the house.

”六' was near the bath?”

Having finished observing '五' Yoishi went across the hall to the bathroom with the toilet, turned on the light, and opened the door. She placed her face right next to the symbol engraved into the window sill. When I followed behind Yoishi, I smelled something odd.

Truth be told, it'd been bothering me since I met Yoishi – but now that I was in an enclosed space with her it'd become clear.

”... are you wearing some sort of perfume?”

Yoishi wordlessly shook her head.

“No, but you, this smell...”

And then I realized what that smell was.

I'd smelled it in rooms during middle school.

A sour, nose-curdling smell, as if something was rotting.

”... Um, I totally understand this is a rude thing to ask a girl.”

I pinched my nose as I asked.

“When did you last take a bath?”

And then Yoishi turned around and looked at me quizzically. And then she looked at the ceiling. And when she seemed like she was searching through distant memories, I had a bad feeling.

“W... you have to think about it?”

“I don't quite remember, but maybe last month?”

“W- what the hell! Take a bath! A bath!”

“This is, a bathroom.”

“That's not what I mean! Do you not take showers? Clean your hair?”

“What does that have to do with this number going down?”

Yoishi seemed completely bewildered as she asked me, but come on, I'd heard about dirty girls, and I know French royalty were famous for never taking a bath, but this is contemporary Japan. Do high school girls that don't take a bath for a month exist?

“What you say lacks reason.”

She said flatly, and then peered closely at the window sill again.

“It is without a mistake, '七'.”

And then she turned around and asked, how about '七'? She, really, had no interest in anything other than the paranormal. I sighed, and helplessly guided her.

That was on the landing toward the third floor.

That was where the middle-aged man I didn't know was standing during the suspected-association game Yoishi had made me play earlier. I didn't want to follow her there, so I just gestured “over there.” Yoishi wordlessly climbed the stairs, and then leaned toward the wall.

“Hmm.”

“That looks like '七' too, right?”

However Yoishi didn't immediately answer, instead taking a mini-light from her pocket, shined it at the letter 'color text 七 c red', and looked all around it.

“Is something wrong?”

“This is certainly '七' but – odd.”

What's odd, I was about to ask.

Suddenly, Yoishi vomited. She didn't do anything cute like place a hand to her mouth in an effort to hold it back, but rather standing tall with her arms folded, she boldly vomited, which definitely made me take a step back. Used to vomiting. That's how it seemed, and I completely saw it through.

Dripping vomit.

Sparkling intestinal fluid, and the remnants of the orange juice she'd been drinking.

– What was with her?

Doesn't take baths, takes vomits out in the open.

And loves the occult, and wears coats during the spring, a psychotic girl.

However, I finally noticed that the psychotic girl did seem to be struggling a bit.

“Hey, are you alright?”

I ran to her and began rubbing her back, and she powerlessly nodded, then wiped her mouth.

There was vomit on the landing, but she resumed conversing as if nothing had ever happened.

“I thought it was strange since when you wrote your post. I wonder why the countdown began from 七.”

“Huh?”

“Normally countdowns should start from 十 (10) or 九 (9).”

“How should I know?”

I mean, ghosts are scary because you don't know what they're thinking. How would a human like me know why something like that began counting down from ”七”?

“Wrong. The paranormal have no rules, but the other side has intentions as befitting of the other side.”

Yoishi said as she climbed the stairs. I had no choice but to follow.

As if to say there must be an ”八” and a ”九” somewhere, Yoishi turned on the lights to the third floor and began peering at the walls. Her posture, as she crawled about on all fours, scampering along the walls, was both creepy and comical. Afterwards, Yoishi began mumbling to herself and didn't respond to me, so I gave up and went back to the second floor. I poured water from the sink next to the toilet into a bucket, and threw a rag in. After all, this is my house, and while I couldn't forget the hollow face of the middle-aged man I saw at the family restaurant, I tried not to think about it, and cleaned up the vomit.

Ugh, why does vomit smell so bad. Somehow it always entices you to vomit, too. And it was irritating that the one who vomited seemed to not care at all. As if it was obvious that it would be my job to clean after her.

“Hey, do you not eat? There's only liquid in this.”

I said with a bit of a nasty tone, but Yoishi, who'd come back down from the third floor, simply mumbled that there was no ”八” or ”九” anywhere. I snapped at her totally depressed reaction.

“I said there was none!”

But she ignored my comment and began looking at the walls on the second floor. Half-exasperated, I watched over her as I went down to the second floor with the rag and bucket. Then, I looked at the clock, and asked her, hey.

“Are you alright being out at this hour?”

Of course, that was pretty belated, given that it was almost 3AM.

If I were her parents, I'd be beside myself with anger.

“I hope you called home before coming out at this hour. I mean I know it's my fault this is happening, but parents are always worried. I always thought my parents were annoying when I was at home, but once you go away you feel gracious for it.”

However, she wasn't listening to my lecture.

I noticed that she was completely immobile, staring at a single point.

“What is it?”

I asked, but Yoishi didn't move. She stood still, frozen like a mannequin. I stood behind Yoishi and looked where she was looking.

That was where Yoishi had vomited – and was exactly where the middle-aged man was standing, in my imagination that I only knew about.

“W... wait a second. Who're you doing a staring match with.”

When I placed a hand on her shoulder, she twitched, as if a curse had been lifted.

And then she whispered, ever so softly, “I see.”

When she turned around, her face was filled with joy. I could tell by the slight blush creeping into her pale face that she was excited.

“Hey, did you notice?”

“What?”

But Yoishi didn't respond, instead turning on her heel and heading toward the foyer.

“H... Hey, hey, wait.”

“Let's get out.”

She quickly put on her deep, black boots, and then walked straight out of the entrance. I hurriedly put on my sneakers and chased after her. I tried not to look inside as I turned off the light, closed the door, and remembered to lock it this time. I stuck close by Yoishi as she staggered down the stairs..

When we walked near where the mama-cycle was parked inside the garage, Yoishi looked up at the building once more, and said,

“This building is very interesting.”

“What're you talking about?”

“Under the stairs to the third floor. There's a meaningless space.”

That moment, I felt a chill travel down my spine.

I see—

The eeriness that I'd felt all along about this house, I finally understood it. Indeed, it had always felt like something was odd about this house. And that was the area under the stairs which I could never reach. You couldn't enter the space under the stairs from either the outside or inside of the house. You hear about places that don't open sometimes. This was similar in that we didn't know what was inside.

“And, look at this.”

Yoishi pointed at the mailbox by the stairs in front of the first floor.

My full name was written on a piece of paper the size of a business card, and three lines had been carved in, as if to overwrite my name.

It was – unmistakable.

”三” (three).

The countdown continued.

Yoishi placed her face almost right onto the engravings and mumbled happily, “this place is real,” but I said with a hollow voice.

“I'm at my limit.”

4

The new apartment was fantastic.

The pretty, cleaned flooring. The new wallpaper. The sterilized unit bath.

It wasn't right comparing it to that house, where the previous inhabitant's remnants drifted everywhere, but I definitely learned that it wasn't right to skimp on housing expenses. This was even further from the university, but houses were nearby. I could walk to a convenience store, and there were plenty of streetlights. This apartment, which was brightly lit even at night, was introduced to me by Karasu.

From what I heard, one of Karasu's acquaintances was the landlord for this apartment, and she was renting a room here too. It annoyed me a bit that the room was simply a warehouse (a place to put paranormal cursing equipment apparently) for her, but I couldn't complain. Rent rocketed to 50000 yen, but it was six tatami 1K with a loft and a unit bath, so it was extremely cheap for the area.

It had been one week since I looked at that paranormal house with Yoishi.

Right after noon on a Sunday, on a rare day with no part-time work and no lectures—

I opened the window and took in the comfortable breeze as I sprawled out in the empty room.

The previous week had passed by quickly.

First, I cried to my big sister and borrowed some money, and immediately moved here. I didn't want to enter that house ever again, and it was expensive having to hire people, but it was worth it. Furthermore, this apartment's walls were so thin that you would almost instinctively want to pick up your neighbors' ringing phones, which made it feel like you were among living people, and you could greet people in the hallways, and if you opened the windows you could hear the lackadaisical voice of the bamboo pole merchants. Basically, this place was overflowing with life. For me, that was extremely important. As I'd been drained of mental energy to the extremes, I required the comfort of living amidst people.

I never met Yoishi again.

That night, I gave her a lift to the family restaurant and parted ways. Everything about her was a mystery other than the fact that she was a high school student and that her real name was Mitsurugi Yoishi. I spoke with her a bit as I escaped to the train station, but I never found out what was going on with that house. She didn't try to explain, and I wasn't in any hurry to ask.

However, I had a strange conviction that something bad was there. Every night, I heard something eerie, and I even ate a countdown, but mostly I believed it because of Yoishi's one phrase: “this place is real.” That this was not a place I could deal with. I immediately thought

that. If you think about it that way, she was why I was able to make the decision to place myself in such a peaceful place, but—

It was true what they say, that when the blade is no longer to your throat, you regain your curiosity.

Now that it was all in the past, I was truthfully somewhat curious.

What did she notice?

What was the countdown?

What is Yoishi anyways? It was hard to explain, but she seemed different from just an occult maniac. It wasn't like she was getting a thrill out of coming close to danger, but rather, she seemed to have no instinct telling her to avoid dangerous areas – in other words, it was hard to explain her as anything but someone wanting to die. Whenever she said something, I felt like the world I believed and lived in was about to crumble apart.

Sometimes I would take a peek at “Ikaigabuchi,” but Yoishi never appeared in a thread.

And of course, no one reacted to the thread I'd started, and it'd been buried deep to the point where I didn't want to revive it. Krishna descended upon various threads, but he never touched on my or Yoishi's case. That was real, I wanted to write, but I had no means of proving myself, and I myself felt fuzzy about it, so I kept myself to an ordinary life.

Indeed – daily life continued.

An increased living expense and an abundance of light and heat. My scholarship was insufficient, so I began working part-time at an Italian restaurant near the train station. I wanted to pay back the moving funds that I'd borrowed from my big sis too, so I started working whenever I had no lectures. My city survival began as I worked myself to exhaustion and flung a tired smile everywhere.

A week flew by, and it was that sort of day.

My first university lecture in a while had just ended, and I was stuffing my textbooks into my bag, when I realized a girl I recognized was staring at me.

She was short, yet her breasts were big enough to notice through her clothing. Her hair was cut straight like a [zashiki-warashi](#), and her face resembled that of a young middle-schooler, matching her red-framed glasses.

“Who's that?”

I stared right back at her, and she cleared her throat once and then came over.

She started taking something out of her pocket, then put it back. I saw that it was some sort of paper. She walked to me, standing straight and still, and in the end, never took out that piece of paper. She had a bit of a vexed expression as she glared at me (although her babyish face made it lose its bite), and then clicked her tongue and then turned away.

“H- hey, hey.”

I couldn't stop myself from calling out to her.

“What do you want, speak up.”

The straight-haired girl turned back around and said, “Idiot.”

“I- idiot?”

Despite being mild-mannered, I wasn't one to stand being insulted by a girl I'd never met before.

“Why are you being so rude? What's your name? What grade are you?”

I asked, but she simply snapped back, “Shut up.”

“It's your fault to begin with.”

And then she pointed her small index finger at me.

“It's because of scum like you that these things keep happening like this. Learn your place, fool.”

“Fool? You...”

After that, she rapidly asked me.

“Do your shoulders ache? Do your ears ring? Are you able to sleep at night?”

Was she some sort of doctor's apprentice? Did this university even have a medical college?

While I was bewildered, the girl finally pulled out the piece of paper from her pocket. She stuck it under my nose. I had no time to take it, as she ran off like a rabbit, and by the time I picked it up, she had already left the classroom.

”... the hell was that?”

No one was left in the classroom by then, so I looked at the piece of paper I held.

It was like a handmade business card.

It just read—

“Beatnik Research Club President - Kurimoto Shina”

And had the location of the Beatnik Research Club situated on the western wing.

That night, I saw a dream.

In my dream, I was still living in that house.

The old three-story mountain cottage by the river bank.

There, I was looking at myself. It was like I'd spiritually departed from my body and was floating in space, and was gazing upon “me” living my life. The “me” down there showed no signs of noticing me, and continued living normally. It seemed I was watching a bit of the past. “I” was living carefree, as I hadn't learned of the fear of the noises at night. Hey, come on, stop with this house, I wanted to tell him, but as a person just drifting in a dream, there was nothing I could do. All I could do was observe.

Eventually, I noticed that Yoishi was sitting next to “me.” The two of us were sitting together on the old sofa I'd picked up after moving. The two of us didn't speak to each other, instead just going on with our lives individually. “I” was yawning as I watched a TV, while she was just quietly reading an old book.

It was just a dream so it was free to make up any situation it wanted, but I still thought it was odd. However, I also accepted that if I were to live together with her, neither of us would really interfere with the other.

Eventually, the “me” down there got bored of the TV, and proceeded to stretch, wash his face, and brushed his teeth. “I” thought about studying a bit, but instead, “I” just immediately went to sleep. As I observed myself as an outsider, I realized that I was a pretty boring person. I boasted that I would turn the fortunes of my family's lumber business that was downtrodden, and had departed Shizuoka in opposition of my father and big sister, failed to get into the seminar I wanted, and wandered occult sites. Plus I hadn't even written a single letter to my mother, who I'd promised to send letters to after coming to Tokyo. Finally, I'd moved into a haunted house because of the low rent, and run into a psychotic girl. I wanted to slap myself.

As I sighed and glared, “I” quickly curled up in my bedroom. Even though Yoishi was there, it seemed I could not see her, as I turned off the light. Yoishi seemed to notice the light had gone off, as she closed her book and stared off into space.

I'd floated down to Yoishi, thinking I'd turn the light on for her.

“It's about time.”

I had a bad feeling from Yoishi's words.

And then – in the darkness, with only moonlight illumination, I heard that sound.

From somewhere, the sound of something being scraped.

An ominous melody ringing across the border connecting this world and the other.

As if something was trying to crawl out of a sealed dimension, as I heard that sound, my body slowly froze. It was like watching those supernatural shows on TV, where they set up a camera in rooms that ghosts are rumored to appear.

This dream, isn't it bad?

I need to wake up as soon as possible.

Because, if I stay here like this–

I would see the “something” that was engraving numbers into this house.

I frantically tried to wake up. I waved my limbs around trying to touch something, but I could not wake myself from the dream. It was like my body had been caught by some black hand seeping out of a different world. Feeling the despair of having been locked into a room with no exit, within the dream, only my panting echoed – and suddenly I found myself next to Yoishi.

On the old, leather sofa, Yoishi and I were embracing each other.

As if I were trying to stain both of my palms with Yoishi's body temperature, I played with her body. That was my wish, and yet, it wasn't. I mean, of course I had some interest in girls as a simple eighteen year old boy, but my lusting wasn't this twisted. I wasn't the type to release my sexual lusts by turning myself into an unseen existence. I was pretty sure I had that much reason in me, anyways.

However – Yoishi showed no signs of fear.

If anything, she was in a state of ecstasy. Her expression was dangerous. I felt my reason making sounds as it broke apart. I licked Yoishi's skin. I groped her breasts through her clothes. I lusted over her soft body with the tips of my fingers. I pulled up her long skirt, showing her white thighs. Yoishi's eyes were barely open. Her lips were slightly parted, and I could see her white teeth. Stop. Stop. Stop. I screamed from within my body, but I couldn't restrain my abnormal, extreme lusting.

However, the moment I placed a hand on her white wrists–

I almost screamed. My arms were not ones I'd become accustomed to seeing, but rather were long and thin, if anything like that of an aged man. Those sleeves were gray and worn. I was

wearing an old suit. I felt like I faintly smelled some cologne. I stretched out my trembling arms and felt my face, my nose, my lips. And what I felt was, hideously, not mine. It was definitely that of someone else – and I knew whose it was.

Him.

That man existing at the edge of my vision. And finally my face tilted against my will. My face pointed toward the window ahead, toward the moonlight – and my eyes locked with the man covering Yoishi.

That instant–

I lost consciousness.

Along with incredible trembling, I woke up.

It was my new apartment with the abnormally bright lighting from the lamp.

To my side was a coffee table with the empty box of the convenience store meal I'd just eaten, and an unfinished bottle of oolong tea. Near my pillow, textbooks and notebooks for university had been tossed about. There was a cheap curtain between me and the sash to the small veranda, and it swayed a bit from the night breeze coming through a gap in the sash.

I breathed deeply.

My heart was still pounding.

I came home from work, ate a bit and then had fallen asleep.

Fuck off with scaring me. I felt malice towards no one in particular and grabbed the bottle. I gulped down the third or so that was left of the oolong tea. I felt incredibly thirsty, and even the lukewarm oolong tea tasted delicious. When I finished, I felt a bit calmer, and I scratched my hair as I exhaled sharply.

”... Calm down. Just a dream. It was just two weeks ago. It's not surprising to have some fear still in my heart. That's why I saw that dream, that's all.”

I mumbled to myself in an effort to persuade myself, but my heart didn't stop pounding. I could still feel Yoishi's soft body in my hands.

Then I realized that something was ringing in my head.

It was like a phone from next door, like a cell phone in my pocket was still ringing, a quiet, but definite warning sound. What... what's bothering you. I looked around. New white wallpaper surrounded me, and there was just a spacious, vacant room that I hadn't been able to fill with furniture. Nothing had changed between before and after I'd slept. However, the bell inside my head kept ringing.

“What is it?”

I stood up and looked around the room again. There was nothing out of the ordinary. The aftereffects of a scary dream were just bothering me, that's all. I was trying to think that when I noticed it. Next to the wall was a ladder leading to a small loft. The lighting for the loft was different, so it was slightly dark there. Just then, I felt something cold travel down my spine.

Why did I pick a place with a loft?

That dark area, where it felt like someone might jump out at me from, gave me bad thoughts. However, it felt like the warning inside me was directed straight at the loft. I mustered the courage to look up, and the warning sound grew louder. I swallowed once, and turned on the light to the loft next to the ladder. I placed a foot on the ladder, climbing it one step at a time. And then, I willed myself to look into the loft.

Of course, there was no one in the loft. The only thing there was a cheap sleeping bag I'd bought instead of a blanket, and a number of books that were scattered about.

“Hahah.”

I breathed with relief, and was just about to climb back down, when I noticed it. On the other side of the sleeping bag, at the furthest wall, I saw something. Wounds. Two lines had been violently drawn.

I screamed a silent scream as I tumbled from the ladder. I made a loud sound as my knee and shoulders struck the ground but I didn't care. Somehow I managed to grab my wallet and cell phone, and I jumped out of the door.

Not lines. Those weren't lines – that was..

”二” (2).

The number ”二.”

I had even moved – but the countdown continued.

I jumped into the night city and ran to a convenience store in search of light. As I ran, I tapped at my cell phone, accessing “Ikaigabuchi.” And then I looked at the forum from end to end. I didn't care if it was Karasu or Suu or Yoishi or anyone. I desperately looked for someone I knew. And then I saw it. In a thread titled “Mysterious dimension ☆ [Isejinguu](#), a mere thirty minutes ago,

“Yoishi” had posted. Ignoring the serious discussion of how to see [Yata no Kagami](#) at the Koutaijinguu, I posted there.

“Hey, Yoishi. Help me!”

The occult maniacs who had their debate interrupted laughed at my spontaneous post, but I ignored them.

“Yoishi! You're reading this aren't you? Talk to me. He's still following me.”

But, of course, Yoishi never answered, and it just angered the Isejunguu maniacs. Even after reaching the convenience store, I looked around “Ikaigabuchi” while I was in the parking lot. I tried writing in places that Yoishi might find interesting. To contact me immediately. But maybe I'd posted too often, because the entire forum rose up in arms calling me a spammer. If I got banned, I'd have trouble contacting her, so I started responding, “No, I'm not a spammer. I'm seriously in trouble!” but people just coolly responded that that was spamming. Eventually, others began calling me “wannabe” and I got pissed off and shouted at them “you scum occult maniacs” and the flames continued. It was like 100 vs 1 as the flames continued being spat. Right as I was feeling like the world was against me, and I was about to slam my phone against the ground:

“Are you Nagi?”

Someone wrote that.

When I looked at the name, it said “Krishna.”

That name was like a miracle descending upon me, and I almost crumbled to the ground. I tried to type a response, but my fingers were trembling too much.

As I struggled like that, Krishna posted again.

And—

It said.

“Come to the place written on the card I gave you this afternoon.”

5

It was past 2AM.

I'd left my bicycle behind, so I plodded my way to the university on foot.

Of course, the front gate was closed, and the security guard looked at me suspiciously. In an effort to escape from that look, I took a wide arc and then went along the fencing toward the line of Zelkova trees on the left. After you walk a bit here, you get to the western wing, which housed the Beatnik Research Club room.

“Kurimoto Shina – Krishna.”

I was so careless.

I noticed nothing.

That the administrator of “Ikaigabuchi” Krishna was a person who attended the same university—

And for that baby-faced girl to be Krishna was unimaginable.

I went straight to the furthest room, and was shocked when I entered. There were still some students inside chatting with each other. I felt a bit exasperated, as though this was some sort of never-night castle, but I guess this was just the way it was for students, and so I felt a bit embarrassed about myself still being afraid of ghosts. My feet felt heavy as I arrived at the Beatnik Research Club on the third floor, and I saw light on the other side of the smoked glass. I knocked on the door and heard a familiar voice, so I said.

“It's 'Nagi.' Yamada Nagito.”

“It's open.”

“Excuse me.”

When I opened the door, I found myself facing an empty, concrete-walled room of about ten tatamis.

There was a single steel cabinet placed against a wall.

In the middle was a relatively large worktable.

And there were four seats placed around the table, and three people seated.

In the middle—

Was the baby-faced girl who'd given me a business card in my classroom.

The red-framed glasses were as odd as usual, but she was wearing what seemed to be a priestess outfit stained in black, had on a [takageta](#), and sat on a seat. This suited her too well. I had no interest in such types, but I could almost understand how people who liked lolis and people who liked cosplay felt, which was scary.

“Um, you, I mean, are you Krishna?”

I asked, and the girl made a disdainful face and nodded.

“I warned you to leave that house immediately.”

“Huh?”

“Karasu told you nothing?”

“Nothing at all.”

And then Krishna cutely clicked her tongue and said “well, come in.”

I looked around the room again and – next to the small occult site administrator was a woman who seemed to be in their late twenties and did not seem like a student wearing simple, white eastern clothing, and a bald, middle-aged man wearing monk attire who no matter what looked nothing at all like a student.

“Eh... huh... um.”

I didn't know how to greet them, so I just stood bewildered at the entrance, and Krishna made a motion with her small chin to “sit there.” I sat down on the chair that had been prepared for me, when the middle-aged monk stood behind me and grabbed my shoulders with his thick arms.

“Um... hey, what's going on?”

And then Krishna pushed her glasses up and asked.

“Why are you trying to see the **other side** on your own accord?”

And then she began lecturing me in a stern voice.

“Alright? As long as we don't look, they can't see us either. You can have interest in the occult. It's natural and unavoidable of people to have interest in things that are little understood. Still, the other side has the other side's business. To them, not being able to see does not count as an excuse. Even if you can't see them, humans have enough power to be able to feel them. This is eerie, then immediately understand that there's something you can't see and pay it due respect.”

In the face of her stern look, I the fool could understand.

“So, basically, I've been possessed.”

I asked tearfully.

“At this rate you're pretty screwed.”

Her expression became ever sterner, and I froze.

“Krishna.”

Said a woman in white clothes. She had no make-up on, and held a strangely-shaped rosary in her hand.

“It's already gotten a bit inside.”

... What? What inside?

“Can you pull it out here?”

“I'll try.”

The two of them finished their strange conversation.

“Wait, Krishna. Who are these two?”

I asked as I tried to escape from the strong monk.

“Investigators for 'Ikaigabuchi.’”

Answered Krishna bluntly.

“Investigators?”

“I'll explain later. Just shut up and stay still.”

“It's not use. The host isn't here.”

I heard a female voice from far away.

“We have to go to that house.”

“You're right.”

The middle-aged man and Krishna's voice also echoed a bit, like a record that was losing some speed.

I'd begun to slump down. The monk was strong, but that wasn't the only reason. It was as if I had never noticed that I was on the verge of toppling over under extreme weight – and as soon as I realized that, my body's senses frantically tried to show me the level of exhaustion I felt. I felt that sort of exhaustion, one that tried to sink me into a bottomless pit.

“You can't move? Then don't move.”

Krishna said in a mysteriously kind voice, and then I lost consciousness.

To be honest, I don't remember much after that. I think I was loaded into a car. And then I think there was a lot of shaking. My consciousness came back because I felt a familiar sense of cold on my skin, one that seemed to want to wring me dry. My body was still heavy and my consciousness felt like mud, but my life instincts seemed to shout, this place is bad.

When I came to, I was in front of that house.

The middle-aged man was carrying me on his back, climbing up the stairs to the second floor.

– No, no, I don't want to come here anymore.

I wanted to shout, but in reality I couldn't even move my fingertips. Not caring for my will, I was carried forth by the middle-aged man, and stood in front of the entrance to that house alongside Krishna and the white-clothed woman. Krishna easily opened the door. I thought I'd locked the door, but it opened without a key. Inside glowed an ethereal light.

“Who.”

Said Krishna sharply.

I forced shut my resistant eyelids.

– No. I don't want to see.

I didn't care who was inside, I didn't want to deal with anymore. I give up. I decided right there and then. If I were able to wake up safely tomorrow, I would go straight back home to Shizuoka. In the end, it was impossible for me to live alone in the demonic city Tokyo. I wanted to turn around the fortunes of my family business, and came to Tokyo to study for it, but I'm too much of a wuss to live alone. I'm better off living in the rural area surrounded by family and friends. My father and sister who opposed my decision were right, after all. Ahh, mother supported me but I felt apologetic toward her. But I tried. I tried my best. But these happenings, I couldn't expect them, and I could do nothing—

“Come inside and close the door.”

Someone said, from inside the house.

I recognized that voice. Cold, clear, but somehow decisive.

“If you want to know what's to happen, then you should do that.”

Right – this voice.

“Yoishi.”

My whisper echoed through the silence.

“Yoishi?”

Yoishi's lackadaisical voice saying “good evening” overlapped Krishna's incredulous voice.

“There was a spare key near the sewer entrance below, so I used that to come in.”

“Let's go in.”

At Krishna's voice, the middle-aged man entered the foyer while carrying me. And then he took off his shoes and continued to the living quarters. Krishna and the white-clothed woman followed behind. When I looked past the middle-aged man's shoulder, I saw Yoishi already sitting in the middle of the empty living quarters with a candle inside an empty can. The dim light came from that.

“Who are you, and what are you doing here.”

Krishna sounded as if she were scolding, but Yoishi answered lackadaisically again.

“Quiet. If you brought that person here, then you too already understand what's going on in this house.”

“Yoishi... I see.”

Krishna groaned.

“You're 'Yoishi.' You're the child posting on 'Ikaigabuchi.’”

Yoishi continued her silence, but Krishna clicked her tongue and continued.

“I have no problem with you having interest in the occult. But having interest and actually tip-toeing the edge is different. You should realize that you're playing in a hazy boundary.”

“No worries.”

Yoishi flatly responded to Krishna's harsh tone.

“I have confidence only in that conviction.”

... Wow. She's undeterred by this angry Krishna.

This is why girls are scary. My big sis was scary, too, and when mother snapped she was scarier than father.

However, Krishna sounded a bit lonely.

“I know – I know. I've seen children like you before. That's why I say it. People who harbor expectations from the depth of the darkness, they always drag humans into the darkness, too, even if they don't mean to. That's – extremely dangerous.”

The middle-aged man slowly let me down from his shoulder and laid me by the wall in a sitting posture, and I had nothing to do but listen to their conversation. My powerless body felt like it was being dragged about, and I could only feel an endless sense of helplessness. What happened here, what's happening here, and what's about to happen here, everything was off the rail my life had been following. I could do nothing here. All I could do was listen to the creepy conversation, and be an observer to a creepy act. However, more than the desire to learn the true, my desire to run away was stronger. As soon as possible, I wanted to go out into a bright place.

“Krishna.”

Just then, the monk stepped in between the two.

“It's started.”

Along with his words, that sound began.

From somewhere in the building, that sound echoed.

.... scratch
Scratch scratch scratch
Sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss

As if overpowering everything, only that sound echoed. Scratch scratch scritch scritch, something was grinding together. Something was carving together. The sound was the loudest I'd heard. It was almost as if something was trying to crush this place from outside, and I frantically looked around. I was completely in tears, and only the creepy sound filled the world.

– Please, stop. Forgive me.

As I started tearfully screaming, Yoishi said.

“Wonderful.”

Her happy voice entered my ears, and I became enraged.

– Wonderful, are you seriously insane? It's beyond sanity to sneak into a house with a ghost milling about using a single candle and just sit there. Ahh, I get it, you're that. You're like a friend of ghosts. Then great. Can you tell your friend to stop scaring me? I'm sorry for barging in on your house. But I didn't know. I cleaned up after myself and left so stop bothering me and go away. I mean, tell the friend to stop following me to my new place and giving me a countdown. I don't know what sort of grudge they have against the world but I'm completely unrelated so stop, tell them.

Of course, my body wouldn't move and neither would my mouth, but I begged Yoishi with my all.

However, Yoishi didn't understand my feelings at all.

“Hey, scared?”

I heard an inexplicable, hopeful voice in my ear. It seemed Yoishi had come right next to me, but I couldn't open my eyes. So I screamed at her with my soul.

– Of course I'm scared. I'm super scared. My body won't move and I don't get it and some sound is echoing through my head and only psychos and ghosts are around me. Right, this house only has psychos now. A psychotic administrator that gathers and edits creepy articles, a psychotic woman holding some bizarre weapon despite being of age, some psychotic baldy who seems to only have muscle-building as a hobby. And you. A covered-in-black straight-frontal-hair psychotic girl. And there's some douche ghost that never shows itself but does annoying pranks like carve numbers. Seriously, cut that shit out. Are you all just enjoying your emergency offline meeting right now? You're all just waiting for me to pee my pants aren't you. Hey, come on. Cut it out. I was wrong. I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to see those numbers anymore. Next is “[color text — c red](#)” (one), then what? What's next? I don't want to know. I mean if you're gonna kill me, just do it. Stop cornering me and shit.

– However.

At some point, the sound had stopped.

My dark world, with my tightly shut eyes, had become filled with silence.

What? What? What happened—

I became worried that everyone had left, but I was also afraid that if I were to open my eyes something else would be there.

Still, I couldn't just stay like this. I was tired. I'd begun to feel reckless. If you're gonna kill me, kill me. I don't want to get cornered and hunted like this. Just give me a bad end already.

I opened my tearful eyes. But, I just saw a house, unchanged from before. And everyone was there.

Krishna stood in front of the door to the bedroom.

The white-clothed woman stood in the middle of the living room with her eyes closed.

The monk lingered by my side, and only Yoishi was looking at me with no emotion.

Everyone was standing at the same spot they were before I closed my eyes. I gazed with my teary eyes at Yoishi's eyes, and then she nodded. And then she looked down.

I followed her sight.

To my feet.

As if cutting across the space between my feet, a thick wound had been carved into the floor.

“U- uwaaaaah.”

I screamed, and pulled my sluggish body away. But my hip wouldn't respond, and so all I could do was flail in place. However, I tried to scramble away anyways.

You know what's coming.

It was— ”—.” (one)

“One. The end. I'm tired of this, I wanna go home. I wanna go back to Shizuoka.”

“Calm down, Nagi.”

Said Krishna. At some point she'd started calling me Nagi, but I didn't care as I tried to crawl away. I was too busy trying to flee from the number.

“No. What's the point of staying here? What's going to happen next? What's going to happen to me?”

“Get a grip, Nagi.”

Krishna sounded again – goddamnit it must be the monk. Some heavy impact struck my back. And after that, the white-clothed woman said something I couldn't understand. It was filled with strange rhymes I'd never heard before, countless words that made me head go insane—

But then as I frantically flailed about, a long, black skirt blocked my way.

It was Yoishi, dressed in obsidian, as always.

“Move.”

I said with a trembling voice, but this time it was not glass beads, it was not glimmering, but rather, this time Yoishi had a fascinated look as she reached out with her hand.

“Give me that.”

..... that?

“What you're holding, that.”

She said, and I looked at what I held in my hands.

There was the key to the apartment. It was a key I'd left in my pocket. I was holding it backwards, and on the end of it was wood. For a while, I didn't know what it meant. And then the wood fell off, onto the “—” that had been cut ominously at my feet.

“Wha...”

— No way.

— No way, that.

“Yes.”

Yoishi said in a whisper.

“The one that was carving numbers into this house, was always **you**.”

With those words—

My consciousness was filled with white.

6

“In other words, it was a schema.”

It was an evening, roughly five days later.

Krishna was talking to me in the Bea-club room at the university.

“Or rather, a reverse schema. That house makes people uneasy.”

Krishna and I were facing each other in the room, under the light from a pretty dawn.

“The house... makes people uneasy?”

I repeated like a fool, and Krishna nodded.

“In the past, 'Ikaigabuchi' investigated similar places too – the structure of the building causes changes in the human psyche toward anxiety, there are actually a number of them around the world. Some of them turn into murder scenes, and others turn the people within into criminals. There's no actual scientific proof for the relation, but I'm of the opinion that they exist. People's minds, after all, are hazy things that you can easily manipulate into leaning one way or another.”

“W- wait a second. What exactly do you mean?”

“Basically, that building wasn't built for people.”

I felt something like a cold hand gripping my heart.

“I'll avoid saying the name here. But the architect of that building had actually received architecture awards during his time in university. People had high expectations of him.”

Krishna was illuminated by the golden sunlight, and her straight, black hair glittered as she spoke in remembrance.

“He was supposedly a very serious person. Maybe too serious. He was the type of person that wondered what buildings are – and he would lose sleep pondering that. He loved the joyful faces of the landlords so much, and worked and worked. However, he realized the futility that arose when one person asked him for another design, as he saw the house he'd put blood and soul into be demolished in the name of 'renovation.' Families changed. Preferences changed. It's unavoidable, as long as you're living, but he couldn't take it.”

– If you take care of it while living, it would last over a hundred years. – Sometimes, people should suit themselves to the house.

“He left those words and is said to have vanished from his atelier one day. His family put out a search request, but no one could ever find him, and some years later he was effectively declared dead. That was over thirty years ago. That atelier was his final work, and had at some point been dubbed 'the house that grants wishes.’”

Krishna pointed out the third-floor window, toward the residential district.

“This country tossed aside countless traditions along with its Meiji-era cultural revolution. I'm of the opinion that one of those traditions was the house. Tiled roofs became scarcer of the years, and buildings that housed several generations became rarer. Mass production, mass consumption – that was the era we'd entered. We weren't inheriting treasures anymore, believing instead that you could reset life every few decades. After all, that sufficed for supply and demand. But I think things that were important to the people of this country faded away more and more.”

After I heard her words, I thought.

My father was saying the same.

It takes thirty years to grow a single, sturdy tree. And yet, the Japanese lumber industry found itself in danger of going out of business in the face of cheap lumber being imported. It wasn't that he was worried over his job. He was afraid that the idea – that you could get an unlimited amount of cheap wood – would become ingrained in the minds of the people of this country. In the past, people would pray to the gods of forests, would cut trees while offering thanks, and carefully built houses with them. Whenever they were rebuilding, they carefully tried to reuse wood

whenever possible. Even on this earthquake-riddled island, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C5%8Dry%C5%AB-ji_Houryuuji had remained standing for a thousand years. The skill Of the carpenters who understood the finest details and characteristics of wood in the day were, of course, amazing, but they also say that the graciousness toward the important offerings of nature was just as important.

I always agonized over having been born into a family whose business dealt with lumber.

Did I take care of buildings as I grew up? Did I ever think about the feelings of those who created the building? I was filled with emotions as I wondered if a day would ever arrive that “his” wish would come true, within this grand city where every day you could see the sites of reform or reconstruction?

According to Krishna, everything originated from the design of that house, which contained the intent of the architect. When an architectural friend of Krishna took a look, they noted that while it looked simple, it used extremely high-level techniques. They said that the groaning of the house was to give it durability against hurricanes and earthquakes, along with a bit of playfulness to deliberately make it groan.

“The meaningful space under the stair is the center-point of a sturdily built house. The kitchen, which gets abused the most, was deliberately omitted. The living quarters were deliberately designed to interfere with daily routine. It was certainly a house constructed for durability.”

Krishna mumbled, as she pushed her red-framed glasses up.

“Normally, houses should revolve around the inhabitants, but not in this case. People naturally begin to feel like the house was built for something other than themselves, and that was enough to psychologically rattle people. So what happens when a boy who'd just recently come to Tokyo, who has no friends decides to live there?”

“So in other words, it had nothing to do with ghosts?”

“Indeed, you're much more mentally fatigued than you probably realize, having moved to a city alone. You may have felt fear at first, but you probably tolerated it. But eventually you reach a limit, and then what do people do?”

Krishna looked at me with her big eyes.

“They create a reason for escaping from fear.”

“Creating, a reason?”

“Yes. They create a reason for the sounds. In other words, you were subconsciously carving numbers into the walls of the house at night.”

“But—”

I was speechless, and Krishna leaned closer.

“Think about it, Nagi. Where does fear come from? It comes from the unknown. That's why people learn. They research inexplicable things to escape from fear. People's knowledge was born from effort devoted to escaping from fear. Cooking developed out of the fear of starvation, clothing developed out of fear of external temperature, and buildings and weapons developed out of fear of enemies. Everything began from human fears. You thought there was an inexplicable sound at night. However, no matter how much you searched the house, you couldn't find a reason for the sound. Of course. You'd have to know that the house was deliberately designed to make sounds, but you had no way of knowing. Then what do you do? You were cornered, so you created a reason for the sounds. In other words, a **reverse schema**.”

Is that even possible?

No – it had to be. Otherwise, how would the number ”四” have been carved into the back of a shoe I'd been wearing all along? I was wearing it, so it had to have been me.

My lower body was trembling. It terrified me, the other self that acted irrespective of my will. Or rather, that I didn't understand myself.

“Well–”

Krishna sat back down and sighed.

“It was partly my fault for leaving a building like that alone, even though I knew it existed right near me. Sorry.”

She said, as she bowed her head, which flustered me.

“No no no, stop that. It all started with me being greedy, because I wanted to skimp on living expenses and didn't immediately move out. Please raise your head.”

I frantically said.

“Mmhmm, it was your fault.”

She nodded.

“There are no shortcuts for granting wishes.”

I could give no retort, and just groaned.

However, I realized there was one question that hadn't been answered.

“Hm, wait. Then why were the numbers counting down?”

And then Krishna shook her head, saying “who knows?”

“Huh? You don't know?”

I asked, and for some reason her big eyes glimmered with amusement.

“I don't know. I don't know, but I think you probably carved a cross on the wall.”

“A cross? Not '七'?”

“Right, the number '十' (10). It's possible that it might not have been meant to be a number to begin with. It probably didn't matter to you. Your fear was alleviated by carving anything into the wall, to act as the source of the sounds. However, this is why this incident came forth, a little bit of coincidence. On the place you carved, **there was from the start, out of pure coincidence**, a scratch. Subconsciously, you'd remembered where you carved '十'. Yet when you woke up, it combined with the original scratch to create '七.’” And that was what gave birth to something else inside you – a 'ghost.’”

... Ahh.

So that's why I felt an incredible amount of anxiety when I first saw that number. The feeling of having encountered something far beyond my threshold, that I could not reason out.

“After that, you continued carving letters into the wall in accordance to the sound you heard after sleeping. The countdown was probably because of your subconscious desire. If the numbers went up, it would continue forever. You were probably hoping that it would eventually stop.”

After that, Krishna had a bit of a mischievous look.

“But you're quite simple. If the countdown ended, you may have ended your life. I'm glad we made it on time.”

And with that, she showed me a soft smile for the first time.

“Alright? If you've had enough of this, don't enter the world of ghosts out of curiosity. And as with living people, pay respect to all existences. That's the main motto of 'Ikaigabuchi,' after all.”

And the Krishna who said that with complete seriousness matched the imagine I'd had of Krishna the person.

Although—

She had a more moe-character appearance than a big brother or father.

And with that, the complex, tangled thread had been solved.

According to Krishna, she'd realized that the building caused anxiety in the psyche of its inhabitants the moment I made my first post. In an effort to keep it under wraps, she had left it in Karasu's hands – but Karasu was pretty careless to begin with and then became drunk, so the important message had not gotten across to me, which is why things had escalated to this point.

In any case, everything was solved, so that was good.

“I'll give you a warning, though.”

As I was leaving the house, Krishna had told me.

“You don't seem to have much tolerance for this area. Maybe I shouldn't be saying it as an administrator for an occult site, but you shouldn't delve into the occult genre too much. Find friends in Tokyo with whom you can bond, get a girlfriend, and construct a proper, solid identity while you dabble in the occult as a hobby, that's the right way to do it. Especially – avoid that girl named Yoishi.”

... Which sounded about right.

As Krishna said, Yoishi was abnormal. She was, to put it frankly, like her feet were planted firmly on the other side. That was probably why those urban legends popped up over her odd level of concentration on the paranormal.

The sunset was extremely beautiful as I stepped out of the west wing.

The clear, orange color shone straight to my soul.

Dang.

I'd become easily moved by this incident, and almost came to tears just out of graciousness toward peacefulness. I hung on, willing myself against crying. There were a lot of students about, and a feeder high school was just on the other side of the gate to the west wing. There were a number of high school girls going home, too. I didn't want to embarrass myself as a university student.

But then—

I realized one of them was staring at me.

Her black hair was pretty, she had white skin, and was slender. Her uniformed figure was blinding, and just by standing, she looked like she was from a different world...

“Wait... what?”

I eventually realized that I recognized that girl, and couldn't restrain myself from running to her.

“Wait, are you Yoishi?”

And then girl turned her glass bead-like eyes to me.

“Oh, you.”

Her sleepy response made me realize she wasn't looking at me.

Yoishi was wearing a school uniform, and perhaps as a fault of her looks, stood out. Even in such an appearance, she seemed distant from daily life.

“Hey, what a coincidence. You attend our feeder school? What year are you?”

I spoke to her with a full smile.

“That has nothing to do with you.”

Yoishi's response was quite cold.

There was none of her bedazzled, vitality-filled look anymore that she had when looking upon the paranormal.

“I hadn't come to school in a while – and I shouldn't have come at all.”

She said with annoyance, and I noticed she didn't have the sharp smell from before. It seemed she'd taken a bath. Glossy hair, an ironed white blouse, a black tie. I narrowed my eyes as I gazed at the contrast from before, and said.

“Pretty good.”

“What is?”

“Your looks, you look more clean, and your uniform suits you.”

However, Yoishi turned her back to me, saying I was pathetic.

I intended to praise her, but it apparently just annoyed her.

“If it's nothing, I'm going.”

She turned on her heel, and I hurriedly stopped her.

“You were staring over there, did you want something from Krishna?”

”– Krishna.”

She seemed to react to that word, as life seemed to return to her glass beads.

“I see – 'Ikaigabuchi' is here.”

Her response to the occult was pretty good.

I felt like I was being driven mad as I continued talking in that direction.

“I'm indebted to you a bit, too. I heard all about that house. I didn't know there were things like subconscious confusion over a building. Man, I freaked out a bit when I learned the truth.”

I was probably on a high from having been released from my fears. I kept talking. I talked on and on. Everything I'd heard from Krishna, the truth about the incident. About the architecture of the house, about the will of the architect, and even about the problems of contemporary Japan.

However, Yoishi didn't react at all.

Without even glancing at me, she said that's good, and continued walking without any trace of emotion.

That made me feel a bit lonely, so I chased after her, bothered by her body language.

“What is it? You seem pretty depressed. Is there anything else on your mind?”

And when I said that, I remembered.

Come to think of it, that day, she said at that house.

“Have you noticed?”

... Right. What did she notice at that time?

I asked her, and she stopped.

And then she slowly turned around, and asked back.

“Do you really want to hear?”

I felt like those black, cold eyes would swallow me—

And I heard something inside my urging me to stop.

That I shouldn't learn any more, it warned.

“You can still turn back.”

Said Yoishi.

“You know what they say – if you peer from this side, they can see you, too.”

Krishna had said that as well, and I felt goosebumps.

But–

I wonder why.

That moment, I had a bizarre sense of excitement. That I wanted to see the world as she viewed it. That I wanted to stand where she stood. That I wanted to know why her words always seemed to sway my world.

“I'll listen. Tell me.”

When I said that, was I seeing things, or did Yoishi seem to have a slightly forlorn look?

However–

I would realize later that this was a fork.

A story about wading in the bizarre and grotesque, helpless darkness of man.

The boundary between that world and this world – the journey around the “Ikaigabuchi” began this moment.

After a moment, Yoishi nodded and then began speaking.

“I was always wondering. What it was called 'the house that grants wishes.’”

“Why? Because–”

“The title lacks a subject. Whose wish?”

And those words gave me chills–

And I immediately began regretting my decision.

“That house isn't a house of hope. I just felt an incredible source of malice.”

Yoishi whispered – with the expression of a queen who'd been locked away in a dark castle along for a thousand years.

“The architect that had disappeared while loving strange buildings. The countdown that began with '[color text 七 c red](#).' The mysterious space under the stairs. The house that grants wishes. There's a single answer that ties everything together.”

My goosebumps wouldn't go away.

What was she trying to say? What was about to show itself?

The girl Yoishi's dark eyes glimmered as she spoke.

”The architect is still inside those stairs.”

“W... wait.”

“Of course, he isn't alive. But then everything ties together. Why there's a meaningless space under the stairs. Why it became named the house that grants wishes. And why the numbers began with ”七.”

“Wait, it doesn't explain anything? It didn't start from '七,' because it was originally '十,' and I had just coincidentally written it over a scratch—”

“Wrong.”

Her words twisted my world.

“You originally wrote '十.' You're right to that point. But there was never a scratch to begin with. Someone added a scratch and changed it to '七.’”

“Why... why can you say that?”

“I saw.”

“What.”

“That on top of your '十,' someone had **added a scratch** to make it '七.’”

“Then... then when Krishna said that there was no ghost in that house—”

And then Yoishi looked in the direction of the west wing with sadness.

“There's no better fortune than living with bliss.”

... Hah.

“That is that person's kindness, and what I lack.”

... Hahahah.

Hahahahahahahahahahahahahah.

I was going to go mad if I didn't laugh.

“You're lying, aren't you? You're making this all up, aren't you? Or it's that. An occult story you'd read somewhere.”

I laughed, praying that that was the case.

Yoishi gave me a sympathizing look, a grieving look.

“Everything's the truth. Because—”

I could no longer respond, and Yoishi quietly landed the final blow.

“When you were carried out, some man I'd never seen before was clicking his tongue on the stairs.”

As the world spun around me—

Yoishi's cold, sweet voice reverberated.

“Welcome to the world on this side.”

case:02 Self-responsibility-type

~wish

~overlay

1

– Darkness is as lukewarm as water and as bottomless as water.

So wrote an American mystery author in his only work translated to Japanese, “The Despair of the Baumkuchen.” I found that book in my high school library, and it was seriously good. I don't usually read books, so for me to say it supports it. The author depicted a somewhat twisted world in a comical fashion, and it was a truly rare occasion where I could not put down the book. I tried to find that author's works after I came to Tokyo, but I could never find anything. I eventually found out that the book I read of his was the only one that had been translated into Japanese, and I also learned the unfortunate news.

Right around when I was reading his book in high school – far away in America, that author fell from a dam and died after becoming drunk.

They say it was a rainy night. There are those who say it was a suicide and others that say it was an accident, but as someone who'd read his book, I'd always found myself fascinated by the night that he'd stood upon the dam before his death.

Just dark – an endless, bottomless mass of water.

Perhaps he could not triumph against his desire to learn of the depth of the darkness?

I thought that–

As I stood smack dab in the middle of bottomless darkness.

Indeed, darkness was like water.

It surrounded me in a lukewarm way, covering, inhibiting the pitiful light from a penlight. And especially so because I was in an abandoned hospital on a mountain that hid the moon and clouds.

”– See, lets go back? I mean, the shattered glass is dangerous, and the concrete is beginning to crumble. And there may be gangsters who're out for blood living here.”

I tried laying out some reasons as I thought of them, but.

“There exists no safe haunted area.”

Mitsurugi Yoishi said with as much emotion as she's never had.

She was in her school uniform and followed the penlight she held in one hand.

Her summer high school uniform with its black tie and white blouse half-melted into the darkness, reminding me of some movie scenes. If we weren't where we were, it may have been a fun event, but her beautiful but frozen face was scary.

It was just past 2AM.

Mitsurugi Yoishi and I were visiting a certain abandoned hospital in the mountains of Hachiouji.

The window glass was shattered and linoleum tiles were scattered about, covering the skeletal remains of clinical records. The posters on walls were half-torn and withering, and if you shone a penlight at them it would look like a bloodied girl was beckoning for you. Worst of all, even though there should be nobody around, it felt like plenty of people still lived inside.

“This abandoned hospital had quite a few bizarre rumors to begin with.”

Yoishi's happy mumbling continued lowering the temperature of the area.

“That you can hear the rumblings of machinery from the basement, even though this place has no electricity; that you can see the ghosts of nurses wandering about; that an empty wheelchair begins chasing you...”

“Hey, stop with that here.”

“But, there was just one rumor that was interesting among that rubbish.”

Yoishi's voice was filled with vitality as it echoed through the darkness.

“It's a rumor in which the number of people visiting this place changes.”

“The number – changes?”

I asked back.

“Is that an odd rumor? Like, people going with four turn out to be five as some point? I hear those all the time.”

I pointed out, but when she seemed happy when she whispered, the other way around.

“What I heard was that the **number goes down.**”

I braced myself, as it seemed the conversation was headed toward an ill-fated direction.

“If you go with four, you find three. If you go with five, you see four. While inside the hospital, the remaining people become frantic about where the other has gone, yet when they step out of the hospital, everyone is there.”

I felt like I heard something snap in the darkness.

Come to think of it, I felt like I'd been hearing sounds not created by us as we walked.

“The interesting thing about this story is that difference in comprehension. When they asked the person who'd vanished, they would say that they were with everyone all along. Yet the others all say that the one was not there. Then, where did that other person go? Who were they with?”

I felt like the temperature was still dropping.

For a moment, I lost track of where I was. I should have been standing on concrete, but it felt like there was only pure darkness. And I could no longer be sure that I was speaking to Yoishi.

Ahh, why did I come here?

I thought I'd learned, but why was I doing this again?

I was supposed to have learned from my prior experience. When her voice and eyes began to show signs of life, it felt like things were slowly becoming warped. The belief, the conviction around me began making sounds of being torn apart, and I could feel myself slowly being dragged into the hole created by the ripping.

I pointed the light at my feet which were alternating in step as I followed Yoishi, who showed no hesitation in progressing—

And was already beginning to tear up.

【About horror spots to avoid!】

Everything began with that thread on the occult site “Ikaigabuchi.”

The administrator Krishna had immediately deleted the thread, but for better or for worse, I had seen the thread by chance. And I noticed certain things.

- Far in the mountain of Hachioji.
- Abandoned hospital.
- People who entered this hospital are hospitalized in a psychiatric ward.

And then I remembered. It was the offline meeting that Yoishi had once attended, for investigating horror spots. They mentioned it was for an abandoned hospital. And that something had happened there, and one person only mumbled “Yoishi,” and that they were still in a psychiatric ward. Mitsurugi Yoishi had always posted psychotic things, but this incident had

caused her to become an “accursed being.” And then over the past few weeks, rumors about Yoishi caught wind, and now she'd become a real Sadako-type character online.

When you meet her, you die in seven days.

You become cursed just by talking to her.

Stories of her appearance circulated, such as being a one-armed man, or a bloody girl, and so on. I was exasperated by the rumors.

Having spoken to her a few times in the previous incident, I'd begun to feel that Yoishi wasn't as monstrous as she was made out to be. She was just an odd high school girl who was very knowledgeable about the occult. Of course, she did have psychotic moments.

And so I thought.

If I could figure out what exactly happened then, maybe her reputation would be restored a bit.

After finishing my lecture that day, I quickly hurried to the west gate of the university. It was about 3PM. The students from the feeder school would be going home then. I didn't think Krishna would tell me anything, and I figured asking the person directly would be the fastest.

“Ah, hey, Yoishi!”

Eventually, the black-haired, white-faced girl showed up, and I called out to her from the shadow of a lamppost.

“Wait, I want to ask you something.”

I said as I ran to her, and Yoishi turned to me with a dazed look.

Her eyes were still like glass beads, I thought.

“Have you gone to the abandoned hospital in Hachiouji after an 'Ikaigabuchi' offline meeting?”

For a while, she looked like she was remembering a childhood friend, and then she nodded.

“Yes.”

“What happened to the other members that went?”

“It was an offline meeting. I haven't kept in touch.”

“You know. One of them is still hospitalized. In a psychiatric ward no less.”

I told her what Zippo had told me at the previous offline meeting.

That someone he knew had gone with Yoishi.

And afterwards, he was still hospitalized, just mumbling “Yoishi.”

After that, she just cocked her head to the side a bit.

“Nothing's wrong with you? What happened there anyways?”

“What... I heard it was a horror spot so I went, that's all.”

“No, but, you knew that hospital was dangerous, right? Why didn't you stop them?”

“They're not people who would stop if I were to say 'this place is real.’”

”..... Mm.”

True.

I would want to go too, if I heard that.

But, no no no. That wasn't the problem. I found out then, that she was special. She had a decisive difference from other occult-lovers. She must have known that hospital was truly dangerous. To know that, and to not warn anyways, what sort of person would do that?

And then she said, as if reading my mind.

“People are responsible for themselves at horror spots. Just like how it always is in this world.”

She said coldly – and I became irritated.

“Do you not care? That's why people act like you're psychotic.”

I said.

But she simply sighed.

“You can't put a stopper to peoples' words. Especially on the internet.”

She said, and continued walking.

Of course, I started feeling it was pointless. I was trying to support her after being worried, so her attitude was quite rude. Still, when I saw her thin back, I had a pang of sadness. She was like a stranger that walked a rough path alone. She seemed like she was carrying the burden of the world's misery and grief by herself.

– God, fine.

I ran after her again.

And then following her, I decided to continue the conversation anyways.

“Then tell me the truth. What happened there. I'll post that.”

And then Yoishi stopped, and looked at me with a curious look.

“I don't understand what the point is.”

“Shut up. Tell me.”

I said once more—

And something seemed to move at the back of her eyes.

“Do you really want to know?”

Her empty gaze terrified me.

Something was beginning to open in front of those dark eyes that seemed to entangle everything. At the same time, my safety device began blaring warning signs. Stop, someone yelled. I had a feeling a helpless story was about to start.

“If you want to know, no matter what—”

Yoishi continued, still staring into the distance.

“It's quicker if you were to go.”

“Go, to that hospital?”

Yoishi nodded, and then scrunched her brows a bit.

“To be honest, I don't really get that place yet.”

”... What?”

“My head hasn't been able to come with an answer that makes me go, ahh, so that's how it is. That sort of pattern is quite uncommon.”

I'd become speechless, and my legs began to wobble, but she continued.

“From now on, it's just self-responsibility.”

... and so, Yoishi and I had arrived here after taking a train.

I see, this is indeed self-responsibility. To have tried to help her without understanding my own level, that's what has led me to wandering this creepy place.

In the dense darkness—

We'd descended to the basement of the hospital, and had progressed along a dark, damp, and humid passageway.

My breathing had become heavier, possibly due to the dirty air. My heart pounded so heavily it almost felt like it'd rip through my clothes, and I'd thought countless times that I couldn't go any further.

But why was I still hanging on?

Why couldn't I grab Yoishi's hand and just say to leave?

That moment—

I heard a snapping sound somewhere, again.

I recoiled, as if something had taken hold of my heart.

“W- what was that sound? We've been hearing that for a while...”

I asked, but Yoishi simply said, who knows? as she continued.

“Who knows... you heard it, didn't you? It was pretty big.”

I stood in a crouch, and kept moving my light about.

“Here.”

Yoishi's voice came from ahead.

I looked toward her, and saw that she was standing in front of a room. I went closer, and saw that her penlight was illuminating a sign reading “Second Resources Room.”

“What about here?”

“One person disappeared here.”

”... Huh?”

I swallowed, then asked.

“In other words, what? That rumor about people disappearing—”

“Was real.”

”... Say that earlier, please.”

I snapped back at her, becoming exasperated, but things began making sense. In other words, Zippo's friend who was hospitalized was the one that disappeared. Of course they'd be stuck in a psychiatric ward if they were stuck here alone in such a creepy place. After all, my knees were about to give out just standing here— no. Wait? Then, why would he have been mumbling Yoishi? Why would she end up having such a reputation?

And then Yoishi quietly shook her head.

“Wrong.”

”... Huh?”

“The one who disappeared, was me.”

Her words gave me goosebumps.

“I was with them the whole time, yet when we left the hospital they said I was the only one missing. We checked after we left the hospital, but our recollections matched perfectly up to this room. Yet, when we left the hospital we remembered things differently. To them, I wasn't inside, and to me, I remembered being with them the whole time. Then – who were the people I was with the whole time?”

I looked at the side of Yoishi's face as she happily explained what happened—

And I really thought I should never have come.

“Why our memories became estranged, and why that happened. I want to know.”

Yoishi went to the door with a bewitched look, then turned around once more.

“Hey, scared?”

She asked, gazing into my eyes.

“How does it feel to be scared?”

And with that, she disappeared into the room.

I was left alone in the dark room, and hesitated.

– Yes I'm scared. Of course. So I'm going home, good luck.

How simple it would be if I could say that and leave.

However, when a human's level of fear passes a certain threshold, their legs become immobilized. To remove oneself from the flow, the action itself feels like it would agitate things that cannot be seen, and thus require a whole different set of courage. Furthermore, her existence as a high school girl was nasty. If I were to run now, I would never be able to escape from the title “King of Wussies,” having left a younger girl alone in a dark hospital.

I had no choice as I slid through the slightly-ajar door.

It was even darker inside. If there were density to darkness, it felt like this place had become even more dense. When I shone my light, I could tell it was a space of about fifteen to sixteen tatamis. In the middle was a desk, and various unfamiliar tools were scattered around it. At the edge were several fallen cabinets with shattered glass, and the papers stored inside were also scattered out onto the floor.

I kicked something as I shined my light. It was a beer can. When I looked around, I saw the remains of tobacco and snack bags. Probably the left-overs from the “thankless” that Krishna despised so much. On weekends this place probably became grounds for scare games.

“This must be a pretty popular spot.”

I said, and far off in the darkness came back a bored voice, probably.

I pointed my light at her and found Yoishi next to a cabinet. She shone her light into the drawers, illuminating the fallen medical records, but eventually she ran out of things to do and walked over to me.

“We were looking at this together, before.”

Yoishi shone a light on the thing she showed me, which was an old university notebook.

“What is this?”

I used my light as I opened it, and realized it was a journal. Letters were written from end to end inside. Most of it was written in hiragana. Occasionally, cars and people were drawn using colored pencils, so I could recognize it was written by a child patient. I turned the pages and noticed that the writing stopped about halfway through one page. It was dated August 16, 1991. And then across the page was scrawled in large letters.

”Please fix my sickness.”

Those words stabbed into my heart.

“The name matches, so it's probably that child's.”

Yoishi handed me a sheet of paper as I started dumbfounded at the yellow notebook.

It was a medical record. There was a record of an eight-year-old boy's medical history.

And at the end was written, in a business-like fashion, “Deceased.”

“He died.”

I mumbled, and she nodded.

And then she pointed her light at the opposing wall and happily rephrased what I said.

“Yes, he was supposed to have died.”

I was struck speechless when I saw the wall.

There—

In hiragana, in the same handwriting as the notebook.

“I'll do whatever you ask if you fix me.”

The writing on the wall was enormous. Each letter was the size of two human heads. And it was written at a height where even an adult would have trouble reaching.

“Did... this boy write that?”

“Who knows?”

Yoishi said, as she shined her light from one end of the wall to the other.

“But, the problem isn't who wrote it when.”

... Then what's the problem?

I thought, but it seemed like it would become even creepier, so I resolved to ask her only after we'd returned to a bright area. See, I've grown a bit.

But, that moment.

The light cut out.

Everything became covered with darkness, and I visibly recoiled.

“H- hey, why'd you turn off your light—”

But then I realized it.

... No. Yoishi wasn't the only one holding a light. I had a penlight too – and I hadn't pressed the switch.

Regardless, for it to become dark...

I heard a snapping sound somewhere, again.

It seemed to echo from afar, yet it also seemed to sound close to my ear. It was like the sound of the air split, like a wall I couldn't see was cracking. And I smelled something at the same time. A rotting odor, like a river filled with dead fish.

“Hey, Yoishi—”

I said with a trembling voice, but there was no response.

”... C- Cut that out, hey.”

I fumbled with the switch of my mini-light as I shouted, and then.

snap crack snap

Sharp sounds echoed around me.

This is – that. The rumored sound of saran wrapping.

And then suddenly my arm was grabbed.

I was about to shriek, but it made me crouch on the spot.

“Silence.”

I kept my mouth shut at Yoishi's sharp whisper.

And then, silence and darkness reigned over the area.

No—

At the edge of that silent world, filled with tension, I could feel something tilting. I could hear an endless stream of quiet noises. Was someone else here? Or was it an animal, a bug? I tried to think that way, but I felt like I could feel something definite. At the very least it wasn't an animal, as it was something that held the same helpless complexities of a human.

And I could tell that it was slowly coming to our room from the far end of the hallway.

I was completely in tears.

And I acknowledged that I was a wuss. If I could leave this place with my life. I would never enter a horror spot again. I wouldn't be enticed by Yoishi's bizarre words again. I would finish my letter to my mother, and I would live a proper life of a student, with filial piety and only school and work. Right. I'd come to Tokyo to turn around the fortunes of my family lumber business. Yet I was delving into an occult site, and was being punished for roaming around a place like this. This was punishment for not writing the letter to my mother as I said I would. I was wrong. I'll live a proper life from now on. So please. Please. I don't know what's going on, but be exorcised already. Go to that other world.

However – as if to destroy my prayer to gods.

“Vanish!”

Yoishi's inexplicable shout boomed, and the desk by my side made an enormous sound.

It seemed Yoishi had kicked it. Something was shattered by that, and a large sound echoed through what used to be a quiet, abandoned hospital. At the same time, my body began moving again. The lights turned back on, and when the darkness was torn away – I saw.

I saw.

In the hallway that you could see past the slightly-ajar door.

A sneaker with blue laces.

And then, stretched forth from the cut, worn sneaker – a thin, bluish-white, rotting, crumbling leg of a child.

“U... uwaa.”

I screamed, and so did Yoishi.

“It's not impossible.”

She shook off my arm and shouted loudly.

“It's pointless. It's unnecessary.”

She kept shouting something.

How was she making such a loud voice with that thin body of hers? Her loud voice cowed me. But her voice seemed to have agitated something I could not see. Countless things I could not see seemed to slither and move.

Simultaneously – Yoishi began running toward the hallway. It may have been a challenge toward something I could not comprehend, or perhaps she was just trying to flee.

“W... wait, wait!”

What the heck, I thought as I followed her a moment later.

I stepped on the door she'd completely knocked down and stumbled into the hallway.

“Hey, wait, Yoishi!”

I pointed my light down the hall, but she didn't wait.

– You bastard, fine.

I was in the basketball club during high school, and was even the point guard. I had confidence in my leg speed.

However – Yoishi was even faster. There was no trace of her usual plodding speed. Her black hair tossed about as she ran like a young deer, and slowly distanced herself from me. On the way, because she never saw them or was doing it deliberately, she knocked down hospital partitions and withered vegetation. As a result, it reminded me of the ding dong ditches we did in Elementary School, making me forget a bit that this was a haunted area. Of course, I regretted it now, but at the time we were afraid of the angry, bald guy that would chase us, and it was hilarious. My excitement from then suddenly reawakened. And here it became nothing less than my savior. I blew away the obstacles that crashed into my legs and shoulders, and I kept running. Excitement triumphed over fear then. I ran down the basement hall, climbed the stairs, and did a quick turn at the first floor. I chased Yoishi who ran in the distance ahead.

“Hey, Yoishi!”

I kicked open the entrance door to the hospital and came outside–

However, there was no one there.

I could only hear the the sound of insects, and found myself in a parking lot with overgrown grass.

Under the moon that shined bluish-white – I placed my hands on my knees and regained my breath. My heart felt like it would explode from my first serious run in a while. I had never felt so comforted by the moonlight before. As I regained my composure, black socks and black leather shoes appeared before me.

When I looked up, I found Yoishi looking down at me.

“Why did you run ahead of me?”

I complained, gasping for air, but Yoishi grumbled venomously.

“Pathetic.”

”... Say again?”

“This place is pathetic.”

In the darkness of night, she glared at the concrete building–

And then she vomited.

Suddenly, she was vomiting in the parking lot.

Her vomit sparkled under the moonlight.

And as I watched, dumbstruck, I thought it looked kinda pretty.

2

“Krishna? Are you there?”

It was about ten hours after leaving the creepy hospital.

I was knocking on the door of the headquarters of the “Ikaigabuchi,” the Beatnik Research Club.

“Hello?”

I knocked several times, but there was no response.

“That's odd. She's always in at this hour.”

I peered through the frosted glass on the door at the darkened room, and stifled a yawn.

It was sunrise when I arrived back at the Musashino apartment from the Hachiouji hospital.

I'd been meaning to amass as much sleep as possible today, so there was a reason for me having diligently arrived at school for the first period.

We'd walked back to the highway from the hospital, then to the Hachiouji train station. The moment we hopped onto first train on the main line, exhaustion finally caught up and made both of us fall asleep. I regained consciousness just in time for the Mitaka announcement and hurriedly jumped off, and for some reason Yoishi hopped off as well. After that, she wobbled about half-asleep, following me to my apartment and eventually toppling over in the hallway. Of course, I told her. Come on, wake up, go back to your home. I even tried pulling her cheeks, but she just stopped moving, as if her batteries had died.

Thus, I had no choice but to let her sleep in the apartment, giving her the only blanket I had – and came to the university myself, like I'd been kicked out. I went to my first-period lecture for “Introduction to Law” to get some sleep, but when I thought about what happened last night, I had trouble actually getting myself to fall unconscious. No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't figure out what was going on with that hospital. The mystery of the vanishing member hadn't been solved, and I didn't know what Yoishi was calling “pathetic” either.

As I thought of those things, I lost my chance to sleep. Consequently, I attended my next class, but couldn't sleep in “Foreign Languages 2” as well. In the end, without being able to catch any sleep, I came here when the noon bell rang.

“Hello? Krishna?”

I knocked again, but there was no response.

There was no response, but I thought I heard something from inside.

“Seriously?”

I remember a posting on the bulletin about someone roughing up rooms.

I was worried and placed my hand on the knob, and found that it wasn't locked. I became suspicious, and decided to enter.

I took a breath – and opened the door.

And when I saw what was inside–

I recoiled.

Completely took a step back.

Inside was a girl with a candle attached to her head using a headband.

She was in a white robe, in her left hand was a voodoo doll, and in her right was a hammer.

She held five-inch nails between her lips.

”Hoo haw.”

The white-robed girl said.

Or rather, she probably meant to say “you saw.”

However, it didn't sound that way because of the nails between her lips.

“K- Krishna?”

I asked, and the red-framed, white-robed girl – Krishna took the nails away from her mouth, glared at me, and said “you saw.” It was a beautiful voice, like the ringing of a bell.

“I knocked.”

“Yes, I noticed.”

Krishna said, angry.

“Unfortunately, I had nails in my mouth. That means I can't respond. I thought 'Whatever, I'll ignore it', but then the door was opened anyways. Thanks to that, my secret experiment is ruined. Who opens the door when there's no response, anyways? Thieves do, that's about it. So you're a thief, then?”

Yes, this style of talking, this small girl–

Was Kurimoto Shina, or Krishna, the administrator of the largest occult site in the country.

Incidentally, she's older than me, even though she looks like a middle school girl working part-time at a shrine as a shrine maiden. But in reality, she was a twenty-year-old, third-year university student, so you shouldn't be fooled by her loli appearance. Her incredible knowledge with regards to the occult and her charisma made her the object of much respect in the internet world.

“I'm sorry, I wanted to ask you something.”

I said.

“I have nothing to say to you.”

She quickly replied.

“I told you not to come here anymore, didn't I? Yesterday, the day before that too, I said the same thing but you seem to lack the capacity to learn. Or is this your way of annoying me?”

“Neither.”

I bowed and let myself into the room.

I looked around the room again and became exasperated. A dark curtain was placed over the wall, and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shimenawa shimenawa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shimenawa_shimenawa) adorned the room. Salt had been placed at each corner, and in the center flickered a single, large candle.

“I'm not sure, but —”

I looked and asked.

“Were you trying to curse someone to death?”

In response, she ripped the candle off her forehead and shouted.

“Fool! Do I look like someone who'd mess around with curses? It's a ritual for stopping curses. Or rather, for returning curses. There are quite a few violent verbal spirits plastered over 'Ikaigabuchi' for various reasons. So I'm gathering all of those malicious intents within this doll and burning it — in other words, earth it. It's a ritual that can't be seen by others, but because of you —”

“Can't be seen... What happens when it's seen?”

“The person who sees it turns into earth.”

”... Huh?”

Krishna wordlessly grabbed my hair and pulled it toward her. She then relentlessly pounded my back with what seemed like a wooden stick with some runes on it. Apparently, it was something like an exorcism.

”... Ow, ow, it hurts!”

“I'm the one in pain. I had to figure out a day and direction of the sun, then gather expensive equipment. How much money and time and effort do you think it took!?”

Then don't forget to lock your door when you're doing something that important...

I wanted to say that, but even as my back was being whacked by the stick, I was able to experience Krishna's well-formed breasts at close range, so I felt blessed. I thought her breasts were big, but when you're this close because she's grabbing your head, you can start to appreciate

how big they really are. I wanted to enjoy the soft sensation a bit more, but after twenty-some odd strikes, she abruptly let go of me.

Hmm? I raised my head, and she was looking at me suspiciously with furrowed brows.

“You've been somewhere dangerous haven't you?”

”..... What?”

“Strange. There should only be the two of us, but I sense a number of people.”

“Wait... stop saying such creepy things.”

”Where.”

Krishna began sauntering over.

Her red-framed glasses crept up to my nose.

“Don't tell me you're still seeing that Yoishi girl.”

... Oh crap.

Krishna had viewed Yoishi as an enemy ever since that incident. Well, she'd given me an answer that was unrelated to ghosts, but Yoishi had then made all of her effort come to naught, so it wasn't really surprising – but after that, she scolded me about dealing with Yoishi.

I thought about coming up with a story to get around this, but–

This person's intuition was terrifyingly good, and I was bad at lying to begin with.

“I won't get angry, so just tell me.”

Krishna began smiling, and I lowered my guard a bit.

That Yoishi and I had gone to the rumor-laden abandoned hospital in Hachiouji last night. That the rumor about the number of people going down had been a true story from Yoishi. That I found a notebook in the resource room in the basement, and saw some large writing on the wall using the same handwriting. Of course, I kept hidden the fact that she was sleeping in my apartment like a corpse, but I explained everything else in detail.

”... I see.”

When I finished confessing, Krishna's smile had turned into a grim facade.

“You went to that hospital.”

"... Yes."

"And with Mitsurugi Yoishi, no less."

"... Yes."

"And you saw something and ran home."

"... Yes."

"You're incredibly—"

She began articulating every syllable.

"Hopelessly dumb."

I was suddenly grabbed by my collar and slammed into a seat. Krishna picked up a pen and paper that was lying on the table, and drew a single line down the middle.

"Alright, listen carefully. This side of the line is where we live. In other words, this side of the http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanzu_River. And the other side of the line is the other world, or the other side of the Sanzu River. To learn about the other world is to pass this line. When you take a peek, they will always be able to see you."

She told me this every time we met, so I listed only partly.

"See, they say if you come close to someone with spiritual powers, your spiritual powers grow stronger as well, right? Well, that saying isn't quite right. When you view a paranormal incident, it means you're looking into the other world, and the feeling of 'knowing' is dangerous. If you know, then you'll interact with ghosts, and that is a terrible thing. It's like having someone stare at you up close forever. Science isn't progressing much in contemporary Japan, and there are no organizations that will help you. You'll suffer alone, grow tired, and elect to die."

While that gave me chills, I looked at Krishna and said.

"But... if that were to happen, you'd help me, right?"

"You—"

And then she blushed red and spat.

"Idiot! Don't think of me as some superhero on TV. All I do is acknowledge the existence of the other side, and warn people. If a paranormal event occurs, all I can do is request help from those trained in that area, so in reality I can do almost nothing. Anyways, forget about that hospital. Also, you shouldn't see that girl again. Don't come here anymore."

Krishna said, trying to close the conversation in a one-sided manner. However, I wasn't one to back down that easily.

“Then tell me one thing. Was Yoishi really the reason for that incident six months ago? Even though she's the one that disappeared, why was it Zippo's acquaintance that was hospitalized?”

And then Krishna stared at me.

”... So that's how it is.”

She mumbled, and then let out a long sigh. Then she sat in a chair, stared at the ceiling, scratched her hair, and finally spoke.

“You're trying to clear Mitsurugi Yoishi's name.”

“Well, um, how should I put it.”

To be honest, that wasn't the only reason. I was probably also affected by my personality, in which I couldn't shy away from stuff that terrified me. But I did notice the winds had shifted a bit in my favor, so I decided to keep the conversation going.

“In any case, I can't imagine Yoishi was the reason. But the writing on the wall, the disappearing people, and then Yoishi said it, the word 'pathetic' – I don't understand any of it.”

Krishna nodded.

“Of course. I don't understand that hospital either.”

I was stunned as the occult site administrator wearing a shrine maiden outfit explained.

“That place has too many stories. Abandoned hospital horror areas tend to have odd directions in general, but even so, that hospital has too many varieties of rumors. There are witnesses to wheelchair ghosts. There are inexplicable sounds. There are ghosts of nurses, ghosts of children. There are some that got lost, while others returned home but lost their souls in the hospital. And now, people vanish entirely – the more information you get, the more inexplicable it gets... to be honest, I've never heard of this before.”

Come to think of it–

Yoishi had same something similar.

That this situation was uncommon, that her head hadn't come up with an answer yet.

“I understand lots of rumors crop up at creeping areas, but horror areas generally tie everything together with a single line. For instance, the famous http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hachi%C5%8Dji_Castle_Hachiouji_castle_ruins spawn lots of

witness accounts of ghosts of warriors, due to tragic tales of the fall of the castle, and near http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meoto_Iwa you get lots of reports of ghosts of young men and women couples. In other words, there's always a root behind the rumors. But the abandoned hospital lacks that. Instead, it's like a tree that branches out as it pleases – and the speed of its growth is frightening. I've seen lots of horror areas, but even I don't know the truth to that one.”

Even this person has things she doesn't know.

It was a bit of a fresh sense of surprise, and I felt the depth of the occult world, when.

“Furthermore.”

Krishna furrowed her brows.

“Those words on the wall are bad.”

“Bad? Why?”

However, Krishna didn't reply, instead abruptly asking.

“First of all, what do you think ghosts are?”

“Ghosts?”

I went, hmm, and said the first thing that popped to mind.

“Like, what's drawn a lot, those things with hands dangling in front.”

“I see, the white-robed with white triangular handkerchiefs. Well, I figured as much—”

Krishna stood up and took an old album from a bookshelf.

“What does this look like?”

A third of the photo on the page she flipped to was a vast expanse of land, and the rest was a clear, blue sky. It was probably somewhere in Hokkaidou. A concrete-paved road stretched on, and to the side were densely packed areas of grass. After that came white clouds and a blue sky. It was a photo of a nice landscape that could be used in a tourist brochure.

“What does it look like? – welcome to a summer in Hokkaidou, that sort of thing?”

“Look carefully.”

Krishna's cute fingers pointed at the blue sky.

A cumulonimbus cloud parallel to the ground, and a cirrocumulus cloud far above—

“Huh?”

... do cumulonimbus clouds and cirrocumulus clouds appear at the same time?

When I realized that, I felt goosebumps.

... Wrong.

This wasn't a cirrocumulus cloud – it was a face.

Countless, white, hollow faces floated in the sky.

”... uwawa.”

I jumped back in my seat and she smiled as she closed the album.

“According to the person who is my teacher, people who die with lingering regrets stay behind with a certain form. Sometimes it's just an arm, sometimes just an eye. They say it's rare to have the shape of a person. And after some time, they begin to forget what they regretted in the first place. In other words, they just become hollow, floating things – however, hollow, floating things can combine.”

“Combine... like, together?”

“Yes. Dogs, cats, people, floating ghosts with no goal combine. And they grow without bound. My teacher said the biggest he'd seen was the size of Mount Fuji. A large clump of souls covered with painful expressions was wandering above the ocean.”

I imagined that and recoiled.

A large clump of souls with countless dog, cat, and human heads. Countless negative emotions stretched out across the sky. Then the sky I often stared blankly at – it meant there were tons of those pinned everywhere. Maybe the clouds I'd been looking at weren't even clouds.

“Who knows. In any case, those floating things eventually fade away with time. There are those who've seen ghosts of warriors, but I've never heard of sightings of neanderthals. There are apparently reasons for that, but it takes a significant amount of time, like a hundred years, for them to disappear. In other words, there are still countless, enormous globs of ghosts existing in this world – and well, the problem is, if they run into some haunted, magnet-like location, they stop there. For instance, enormous haunted areas, or murder scenes with tremendous amounts of hates – they have a tendency to stay at those places. So they become—”

Ahh, I finally understood.

That's what turns them into haunted spots.

Yesterday, the sense of countless people. The feeling of being watched by countless people.

I could still feel it on my skin, and when I recalled the sensation, I felt a chill crawl down my spine.

“And, the problem goes back to the words you saw on the wall.”

Krishna pushed her glasses up and continued.

“I don't know what fool did that, but someone continued the words from the notebook, 'Please fix my sickness' with 'I'll do whatever you ask if you fix me.' It became communication. In other words, it creates meaning.”

I swallowed, and Krishna asked.

“In a place that gathers countless ghosts that have no goal, what happens when you provide them with purpose?”

I felt something cold on my spine.

“They are desperate to seek a purpose. Because they are ghosts, they must seek meaning.”

In my head, I imagined thousands of souls turning to look at me, altogether. Those countless faces, I probably imagined them from the photo I'd just seen – but they overlapped with Yoishi's glass bead-like gaze.

“You wanted to clear her name, I can respect to the intent behind the action.”

Said Krishna, as she seemed to stare into the distance.

“But there are things people shouldn't see.”

I felt my heart freeze.

“In reality, this shore and that shore are designed to be separate. That girl, Yoishi, easily crosses between the boundary. That is an extremely dangerous thing. Her words include things that people must not know. No – at their core, people know, but because they have chosen to forget, they remain people. Yet her words contain them.”

Her words–

I felt like I finally understood why Yoishi's words bewildered me so.

Even though Krishna said the same thing and made me excited, when she said them, it felt like the world warped. As if everything I believed in was crumbling – as if I didn't know where I was standing. Previously, and this time, I experienced that.

“Unfortunately, children like that are hard to save.”

Krishna looked lonely–

And I thought.

She must have tried saving people like that in the past. But she was unable to, in the end. Maybe Yoishi looked like someone in her past, and even if I were wrong–

I'd lost the will to keep asking questions.

I somewhat understood my own limits. My mental strength, my assertiveness, my knowledge about ghosts, they were nothing compared to this administrator. Yoishi too, would continue jumping into the paranormal even if I were to try stopping her. It would be foolish for me to keep following her.

To clear Yoishi's name–

Was something way beyond my powers, I recognized once more.

”... Thank you very much, for a lot.”

I stood up powerless, hoisting my bag over my shoulder, when she handed a white bag to me.

“This is coarse salt purified by [Susanoo no Mikoto](#) from the Imamiya temple. Place this by the entrance to your room for a week. If something odd happens, let me know immediately.”

Yes, I answered and as I opened the door.

“Oh, yes.”

Krishna said to my back.

“You didn't take anything from that hospital, did you?”

Stepping into the hallway, I laughed.

“I'm not that reckless.”

I said, and closed the door.

After stepping into the hallway, as I walked down the dark concrete – I clutched my head in my hands.

I wanted to tell her everything, but my inability to was due to my stupidity.

I opened my bag and took out a notebook.

That was the notebook with “Please fix my sickness” written in it.

3

When I went back to my apartment, Yoishi was no longer there.

She'd noticed the key I'd placed on the table, as she'd locked it and placed the key in the post.

When I entered the foyer, I placed the coarse salt I'd received from Krishna at the edge of the door, and took a deep breath. I told myself that I would go see Krishna again tomorrow and talk to her about having taken the notebook.

When I went to the living room, I found that my blankets had been folded. She may be well-raised after all, I thought, and then I also worried about her constant outings.

Where did she live, anyways? What high school year was she, was she a part of any clubs, what subjects was she good at? What were her hobbies, did she have any pets, what books did she like?

I know nothing about Yoishi.

I didn't know where she lived, her phone number, even her mail address.

Even if I wanted to contact her, I'd have to make a post on the “Ikaigabuchi” forum. We were that unrelated, yet between us, we'd been through problems involving life and death between this shore and that shore. It was like a castle tower date right off the bat.

“Well, I'm probably thinking of dumb examples because I'm tired...”

I resolved to sleep.

My body felt as heavy as lead.

It was still just a bit past seven, but I changed out of my clothes from yesterday and washed my face. I brushed my teeth, and feeling a bit refreshed, I lay down on the blanket. I then jumped up immediately. No, it wasn't that I'd been mesmerized by a flowery scent of a high school girl.

– The pillow reeked.

An extremely sour scent was soaked into the pillow. That was pretty harsh considering I just wanted to sleep. That bastard, the next time I see her I'm going to force her to take a bath. I lay back down after rolling up a blanket to serve as a makeshift pillow, but the odor was so strong that I couldn't sleep.

Since sleep was out of the question, I remained lying down and looked up the Hachiouji abandoned hospital online. I'd taken a look on my computer before, but hadn't checked using my phone. And the results blew me away. Even on a cell-phone-specific search site, or perhaps because it was because of being a cell-phone-specific search, I found an absurd number of hits.

“That place is actually pretty famous.”

I began opening pages from the top.

For the most part, they were community forums, or some region-specific occult sites. But I found a single common thread between them all.

The phrase that it was “a hospital that grants wishes.”

I'd heard that phrase somewhere, I thought, and realized it's what had been tossing me about just a while ago. Fool, there are no shortcuts for granting wishes. I mumbled to myself the words Krishna had left me, and grinned as I looked at the posts. I felt like I was looking at cute underlings—

“My height grew!” “I got a girlfriend!” “My hernia got better” “I got a job” “I won a lottery!”

Every forum had those types of posts.

“Hey, hey, are you serious?”

I'd stood up and kept reading.

It seemed those words written on the notebook and the wall – “Please fix my sickness” “I'll do whatever you ask if you fix me” had caused such rumors to spread. There was even a wiki with information, so I took a look.

- There's a resources room in the basement of the abandoned hospital
- There's writing on the wall saying “I'll do whatever you ask if you fix me”
- Say “○○○○ will fix you” three times at the wall, using your real name
- Say your wish, “In return, give me ΔΔ”
- Afterwards, return something in the hospital back to its original position
- Say to the wall again, “○○○○ fixed it”
- Your wish gets granted

Was how it was summarized.

“Pathetic.”

I groaned.

And as I read other related sites, I slowly became depressed.

I found someone screwing around inside that hospital. Someone burning medical records. Someone peeing next to that, and another making a peace sign with a beer can.

“I see. No wonder Krishna would be enraged.”

She always said.

– Recently, Japanese people have been rapidly losing their sense of ethics.

Traditionally, the Japanese were a race that paid the unseen quite a lot of respect. That probably lead to Shinto, and in any case, Japan had a lot of gods. As with the phrase “if you die, you become a saint,” no matter how much you may hate it, there are lots of festivals for gods during life. For contemporary people like us, our devotion to such festivals may have thinned, but I didn't dislike the Japanese way of respecting the unseen. Of course, at my rural place, we believed in the mountain god quite fervently, and so it may just have been more normal for us to believe in the sun god and such.

And then I looked at the bag I'd left near the living room door.

I crawled over and took out the notebook. It was the journal filled to the brim with the clean writing of the eight year old who had departed from this world. I opened the yellowed, worn pages and read it from the start.

The boy had apparently first come to the hospital for a check-up. He was eager to go back home. But his stay lasted longer, he underwent more examinations, and his words lost their energy. After that, he began writing mostly about what he'd do when he left. Ride a bike. Play soccer with friends. Go out with his family. Go fishing for crayfish. Play video games. Run hard. He began wanting things that children normally do. When I got to the half-way mark of the notebook, he began just wanting to go home. He wrote that the examinations were tough. He wrote often about his seizures. I held my breath at the heavy expressions used by this patient.

And then I realized.

Why I'd clutched at the notebook in the darkness.

And why I brought the notebook out and never let it leave my side.

I couldn't stand it. That this boy who had died young would be left in that dark room.

He was – me.

I had infant asthma when I was child.

It went away as I grew up, but at the time I panicked just from the onset of symptoms. It felt like air was being sucked away from my surroundings, that I'd been smashed into a bottomless, deep ocean alone, as I was beset by a severe inability to breathe. That blinding despair – it still remained soaked into me. When I was sleeping and felt an onset, I'd run crying to my parents. And when that happened, I found one thing more comforting than any doctor or medicine – my mother's palm. That warm palm petting my back gave me a mysterious sense of comfort, and my seizure would stop.

I dropped my hand on the last page of the notebook.

“Please fix my sickness.”

I had a mother, but I wondered if this boy had someone to ward off the suffering.

Did he have a safe place to run to?

That was probably the reason why I brought this notebook with me.

Suffering until death and continuing to suffer in a haunted spot, I couldn't forgive that.

However, I sighed.

I still didn't know what to do with this notebook. If I were to take care of it to the end, it would probably be best to wipe away the letters on the wall, but I didn't have the courage to return.

“Sheesh... I'm such a worthless wuss.”

I scratched my head. And then.

Suddenly, my cell phone vibrated.

I jumped a bit and answered without checking who the caller was.

“Yo! Little Nagi!”

The bright, carefree voice echoing from the receiver froze me.

“It's me, me. How ya doin'?”

“H... Hi, sis.”

– Yes.

It was Yamada Akira, genetically my bigger sister.

“Whaddaya mean, 'hi, sis'? I toldja to lemme know when you're coming home for summer.”

Incidentally, my big sis was a bit of a gangster back in the day, so she still talks like that.

“Ahh, sorry, um, about going home. Umm, how about around the http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bon_Festival Bon festival? Like, around July.”

“Hey.”

Her voice dropped an octave across the phone line, and I shivered.

“Said tell me an exact date. I work, y'know, I need ta ask for paid leave. Yessir?”

Akira, four years older than me, graduated with a two-year degree at a university near our home in Shizuoka and worked at a company near home. I'd never won against her in a verbal spat, and I don't think I could win against her in a physical brawl either. I'd also become indebted to her because of the previous incident. Basically, I was in the worst position in terms of leverage.

“Mum and dad are waiting for their useless son, and you're all grown up now. Learn to pay your elders respect.”

“... I know.”

“Hmm? What's with that crappy answer?”

“I'm sorry. I understand.”

“So, when? Around July?”

“Umm. They should post the exam dates next week, so I'll call you immediately after that.”

“Mm. Next week. If y'don't call me by next weekend I'ma beat you.”

“Yes.”

“Ahh, also.”

“Yes?”

“The bonfire this year, we're takin' care'a it. Get home before Bon festival.”

And she hung up. I stared at the time displayed on the cell phone LCD reading 1 minute 37 seconds and sighed.

My sister Akira, who changed the atmosphere of the room in a mere 1 minute 37 seconds – terrifying.

I looked up at the ceiling again.

– I had my hands full. I was carelessly sticking my hands into lots of things and then leaving them be once I'd gotten in over my head. I'd try living at a cheap place and run away, becoming indebted to my sister in the process, and it wasn't even like I was paying much attention in school, nor was I intending to spend my life studying the occult like Krishna. And now I didn't even know what to do with a notebook I'd taken from a haunted spot.

Briefly, I thought of Yoishi's white, sullen face.

She was incredibly beautiful, but her emotionless, machine-line face was like that of a doll.

There was no way I'd be able to handle her.

I rolled over and fell asleep at some point.

I was in a white, foggy place.

There, Yoishi was laughing, an expression I'd never seen before.

– Hey, you can laugh, after all.

I said, but she didn't seem to hear. Not noticing me, she happily mucked about. She was playing about with something that was slithering about below. I thought it might have been a dog or something, but when I looked toward her feet, I was aghast. There was a snake.

Or – could I call it a snake, as only its torso was incredibly long. At the end of the torso was a face. And, it looked like Yoishi. Yoishi's normal, melancholic, darkened face was stuck there. And then human Yoishi just kept kicking it, laughing to her heart's content. And both of them said at once. Why. Why – it shouldn't feel good kicking a person. I said, but the human Yoishi just laughed. The snake Yoishi went silent, as if saying pathetic. It's alright, this child is a bad child. So said human Yoishi as she resumed kicking. It's alright, I'm bad. The snake Yoishi said that and continued suffering while being kicked. I kept shouting and shouting to stop. But the more I shouted, the more they invested themselves in kicking and being kicked.

Eventually, snake Yoishi's stomach was kicked open, and reddish-black blood began seeping out–

I opened my eyes.

... What sort of dream am I watching?

The room's light remained on. I looked at the cell phone for the time in a daze, and it said 1AM. I'd been sleeping for just about six hours. My throat felt thirsty, so I stood up and was about to get some water from the kitchen.

I heard a bizarre sound from the apartment hall. Something that sounded like dragging. Was it my neighbor? I thought of leaving it be, but eventually that something went thud and bumped into something. And then silence.

"...Now what?"

I fearfully crept to the door, looked through the peeping hole, and was shocked.

There was a revenant.

No—

Mitsurugi Yoishi, who looked like a revenant, was standing there in her school uniform.

"H... hey, what're you doing?"

I asked through the door, but she didn't respond.

I had no choice but to unlock the door, and open the door, and there was Yoishi wobbling in place.

"I'm asking what you're doing there."

When I said that again, Yoishi seemed to have finally recognized me. Her glass bead-like eyes turned to me, and she mumbled, "Oh, you."

"What do you mean 'oh, you.' Don't act like you've coincidentally met me when you're standing in front of my house. Since when were you th—"

—ere I was about to finish, and then I realized.

Yoishi was drenched from the top of her head down. Her drenched blouse became transparent and I could see her undergarments, which made me want to turn away, but I could see brown water dripping from her skirt.

And — putrid. It was the most putrid she'd ever been.

"Were you cleaning mud or something?"

I asked, pinching my nose.

"I have never done such work."

She answered with a serious look. Good god, it was impossible to have a conversation with her. In any case, shouting at each other in the hallway this late at night would bother others, so I let her in. And when I closed the door her odor was even more painful. I immediately decided that there was nothing I could do about the contamination of the hallway. But henceforth, I needed to protect this. I decided to eliminate the rotting odor before it reached the living room.

Come, I grabbed her sleeve, and then dragged her into the unit bath. On the way, her hair, her uniforms dripped brown droplets and I rolled my eyes.

“I’ll find a jersey or something so take a bath.”

I said and pushed her in and shut the door.

I heard “I hate baths” from inside, but.

“I don’t care, get in. Wash your body at least three times.”

I shouted, and then I started going through the cardboard boxes I’d left unopened since moving in.

Even if it were the cusp of summer, she’d catch a cold like that. And the biggest problem was this sewer stench. I’d just moved into an apartment with new wallpaper, so this was too much. From the back of a cardboard box, I found a pair of jersey clothes that had been sent from home, and went back to the bathroom. But I knew the moment I went closer. The sharp odor wafted in the air, and the bath door was open.

“I said wash-”

“I figured out the identity of that abandoned hospital.”

Said Yoishi, whose eyes were tired but twinkling.

– Ah, why.

I’d forced Yoishi to sit in front of the bath tub in the unit bath, and was washing her hair with a shower. I’d been spraying her with hot water for some time, but the brown water kept leaking out like a sewage drain.

It seemed Yoishi had gone back to that hospital alone. She’d returned the moment she woke up at noon, but after doing some investigation it took her until six to leave, and everything was dark by then. Her penlight battery had died, and after wandering the night mountain for a bit she fell into the river.

“Use a taxi or something.”

I said, and she fell silent.

”... Don't tell me, they turned you down?”

”.....”

... I guess it couldn't be helped with her this drenched.

Probably, she'd walked to the train station like this, and ignored all the shocked looks as she came here. I sighed, imagining Yoishi sitting soaked, with her immediate vicinity vacated.

“Alright, Yoishi.”

I said as I kept spraying her hair with hot water, as a senior.

“In this world, taking care of your looks is important. They say people aren't what they look like, but the first impression is quite important. You can get a good start just from that. So at the very least, take a bath every day. If you're going to someone's house, go at a normal hour. I'll tell you now because you look like you don't care about the time, but it's 1:30AM. Normal people are asleep.”

But Yoishi wasn't listening.

She'd clasped her long eyelashes together and looked like she was comfortable staring somewhere else.

This was starting to become silly, but the brown water had finally returned to being clear, so I put shampoo all over her head and forcefully rubbed. Bubbles rose, and the unit bath was filled with the scent of shampoo.

“So what'd you find out about that hospital?”

When I asked that, Yoishi answered, eyes still shut.

“I have nothing to do with the incident that happened there.”

“You mean – about Zippo's friend?”

Yoishi nodded slightly.

“Then, what about you disappearing?”

“I don't want to talk about that.”

... don't want to talk about that?

Then why'd you come here?

I thought, as I kept washing her hair.

“There's a ghost online.”

She said, words that made no sense.

“Have you read self-responsibility-type horror stories?”

“You mean those ones that say 'it's your own responsibility if you read past this'?”

Those were famous online, horror stories that were said to curse you just by reading them. There were several patterns, like becoming possessed by knowing the story, or being possessed if you understood it, those types. But I didn't really believe them.”

“Those are make-believe, right?”

I said, but she began explaining, “not all of them.”

“Ghosts are very sensitive to things that notice them.”

The way she said it gave me goosebumps.

“If you talk about ghosts, ghosts gather. If they know you can see, they come. All of those stories involve that concept. I said amusing stories always have some sort of oddity to them – but that's why. If something says the truth about ghosts, they begin having strange wordings. After all, they depict the truth of the other side, that humans can't understand. That's why when a story has some incompleteness, it's actually complete.”

She always spoke at length whenever it came to ghost stories.

“I don't get it, but –”

I asked anyways.

“What do self-responsibility-type horror stories have to do with that abandoned hospital?”

“It's the same type, when it comes to being possessed once you know the truth.”

At those words, my goosebumps crept from my neck to the bottom of my feet.

In other words, she wanted to say that I shouldn't ask anymore. Krishna always said, if you peer into the other side, they would also see you. They were saying the same thing, but they had different effects.

“Basically,”

Yoishi added.

“The person who became hospitalized had nothing to do with me. I'm fine with just figuring that out.”

She closed her eyes again and went silent.

After that, she wouldn't answer me anymore.

... So to summarize.

She felt some level of responsibility for what had happened in the past. That someone who'd gone to the horror spot with her had become hospitalized. And that she knew the place was dangerous. Even if she couldn't stop them, she wanted to know the answer, and had visited the hospital and learned enough to satisfy herself.

I didn't understand the identity of the hospital, but, for better or for worse, I was busy. I was enjoying washing Yoishi's hair as the shampoo bubbled like a summer cumulonimbus cloud.

No shame in admitting it, I enjoyed cleaning. I enjoyed the feeling of watching something dirty becoming clean. People around me said I was weird, but I liked cleaning ventilators, which are considered tough to clean. Using a toothbrush to remove the oil stains: I felt a lot of excitement whenever I could see the original metal. Look, this thing is actually this pretty, that sort of feeling. I didn't really get it, but like the last scene of the ugly duckling: when the duckling is actually a swan, I like that sort of thing. The old European story, about bear hide, and such. In that sense, Yoishi's dirty, dirty head was a fun challenge to me.

In the end, I ended up shampooing her hair three times. Afterwards, I rinsed it too, and almost felt regretful that my house had no treatment, because Yoishi's hair had become so polished and smooth. I placed a towel on her head and wiped.

“See, look. If you clean it properly, it becomes this pretty.”

I wiped the fogged mirror in front of us with the towel to show Yoishi her face.

As our eyes met in the mirror, my heart skipped a beat.

Yoishi, with her clean, wet hair, was incredibly beautiful. Her smooth skin, her thin shoulders were incredible, and her clear, black eyes were as beautiful as the night sky. She was probably just dazed, but her half-opened lips had a seductive curve.

You could call it – a waste of treasure.

However, instead of saying “thank you,” Yoishi curled her lips and said.

“You’re useful.”

I was about to say are you serious.

I smelled something strange. Ahh, I looked at her uniform. Come to think of it, she was still wearing her muddy uniform. I wanted to take it off and clean her all over, but that was way beyond what I could do.

“You do the rest. You can use the soap there.”

I stood, but the strange odor grew stronger. It was like the smell of rotting fish from the factory near the river. Odd. The ventilator was on inside the unit bath, so it should smell like the shampoo I’d just used–

And then Yoishi suddenly said.

“Did you take something from the hospital?”

”... What?”

She stood up, and then began walking somewhere–

And vomited.

Again, she vomited.

There was a toilet nearby, but she vomited the sparkling intestinal liquid right onto the floor.

“Hey, you, Yoishi!”

I was about to shout, but I recoiled in terror.

I could see through the mirror, which was still a bit foggy, on the other side of the unit bath–

In the hallway, a blue-laced sneaker.

The leg had turned bluish-white, and it was cut up like a drowned body.

Unlike me, frozen in place, Yoishi suddenly shouted.

“Get out!”

Or rather than a shout, it was like a howl, and I jumped up.

Still dripping saliva, Yoishi had turned around to the other side of the mirror – to the hallway.

“H, hey, Yoishi.”

I fearfully looked in the direction Yoishi looked, but there was no one there anymore.

Only the droplets from Yoishi remained on the hallway.

“Ah, hey, wait.”

But she didn't stop, stomping across the hallway.

A river of water formed by the drops from her hair and clothes. She walked into the living room. Invading my new carpet, she continued. And without any hesitation, she went to the bag I'd tossed aside, and went through it.

“This.”

She took that notebook out of the bag and looked at me.

“So you were holding it.”

I didn't know how to explain it, and Yoishi looked at me.

“That's why I landed here.”

4

“Hey, where next?”

I was frantically pedaling the bicycle, and yelled out the question.

“Somewhere with no people.”

Yoishi said, her hip resting on the carriage box of the mama-cycle.

She held in her hand that notebook, which was wrapped in newspaper.

“So the reason why you came straight to my house from the hospital.”

“Yes – I was following this.”

After that, Yoishi quickly ran down the hall to the kitchen, and rubbed the coarse salt from the shrine that had been left on the coffee table over her hands. She then covered her hair and her drenched clothing with it. And then, with astonishing speed, she said, “I’m borrowing this for reading,” and covered the notebook with the newspaper that had been left there. However, she had a bedazzled look. She was sealing something terrible, yet her joyous look made me realize how dangerous things had become.

“So that notebook's dangerous.”

“This is the root of everything.”

“Root? But that's just a journal.”

“Yes – but, everyone put a meaning to it.”

“Meaning–”

And then I remembered Krishna had said something similar.

“Hey, shouldn't we contact Krishna?”

But Yoishi rejected that.

“This notebook shouldn't be seen by any more people.”

Those words gave me goosebumps, and she suddenly pointed ahead.

“Turn that corner.”

“What?”

“There's a place I want to stop by.”

I followed her order and turned into a narrow path off the main road.

There was a small shopping center. They were all closed, of course, since it was nighttime, but it was so quiet that I wondered if it was even open during the day. The streetlights were sparse and unreliable. I'd been trying to stick to roads with lots of people, but why we were going here?

“Hey, where are we headed?”

“There should be a shrine up ahead.”

“You want to seal it there?”

“No.”

She said naturally.

“I want to get a shimenawa there.”

—Shimenawa? Get?

However, as Yoishi said, we soon saw the arch of a shrine.

Beyond the dark, tree-lined path to the shrine was the light for the main building.

I slid the bicycle into the narrow parking area, and Yoishi jumped off. She ran under the arch to a big ginkgo tree beside the main building. I parked the bicycle, ran to her, and quickly looked around.

“Are you sure you can do that?”

“Do you want to be cursed or anger a god? Choose.”

... I didn't want either.

Yoishi must have realized that pulling on the shimenawa would yield no results, as she ran off again. She went into a shack to the side, and came out with a sickle in her hand. Before I could stop her, she cut off the shimenawa. During all this, I prayed toward the main building. Sorry, sorry, she's psychotic. She's probably not a bad person but she's psychotic.

“There's no such thing as a god, so don't worry.”

She said, holding the newspaper wrapped around the notebook in her left hand, and the shimenawa in her right.

“Then why do you need shimenawa?”

“Things that people have prayed to for a long time contain an equal amount of power.”

It wasn't the first time I didn't understand what she was talking about.

In any case, I frantically followed Yoishi, who ran back to the bicycle.

When we were both seated, I took off, as if escaping.

I sped up, pointing the bicycle from the shopping center to the main road, and went back full speed.

However—

I was beginning to have a strange feeling. As if the shopping center was not the same as before – right, as if the number of shops had increased. Just as was the case when we'd come, all the shutters were closed. However, I felt like only a few of the stores had signs, but this time there was a sign on almost all of the houses. No, that wasn't all. I could see dim lighting past the windows of some of the buildings. I could sense people inside. There was enough activity that it was almost as if the stores would open any moment.

“Quickly.”

Yoishi whispered to me.

I didn't need her to tell me: I was pedaling at full force.

Something was wrong. Strange things were happening around me – no, were about to happen.

I could sense people in the narrow alleys between houses.

I could sense them looking at me, but I could no longer look back. I could feel the shutters of the stores I was passing beginning to open. I felt like the area behind me became slightly brighter, but I diligently ignored everything. I just kept pedaling and pedaling.

– Give it back.

Suddenly, I felt like I heard that voice. I could feel countless hands reaching toward me. Sorry, sorry, sorry, I repeated in my heart as I tolerated it. My whole body was covered in sweat. I sped the bicycle toward the end of the shopping center that had begun to feel endless, and flew onto the main street.

That moment.

Blinding light stretched everywhere. I could hear a horn sound. A truck. It was about to hit us from the side.

“U... wawawah.”

I quickly turned. But it wasn't enough. I couldn't get out of the way.

We were going to be run over – right as I thought that, my cheap mama-cycle performed a feat of agility I never thought possible. It felt as if time stopped, and when I looked back Yoishi was hanging on for dear life. Her long hair flowed, and our center of gravity had gone so low that my face almost scraped against the ground.

“Pedal!”

That word snapped me back to reality, and I pedaled with all my might.

Both wheels were sliding, but at the last moment, they clipped the asphalt, causing both wheels to regain their traction.

“NUOOOOOOOH!”

It was just by a hair.

The truck honked again and grazed us as it passed by.

The air pressure of the truck passing by struck us, but I kept our balance. For a while, I couldn't think, and Yoishi was silent.

From ancestors to whatever—

I gave my thanks to every god I could think of.

We entered through the torn fencing, and I found myself on a wetland with wildly-growing grass.

The surrounding area was dark. Whenever the moon hid behind a cloud, we couldn't even see each others' faces.

The ground was soft, and the area was filled with the displeasing odor of sludge. I could hear only the sound of insects.

We were north of Musashino, at a waste dump that was not used anymore.

I looked around, speechless, when Yoishi placed the penlight between her lips and placed a random stone in the middle of the notebook. She tied the shimenawa she'd just vandalized around it.

“What're you doing?”

“Sinking it.”

She said, matter-of-factly.

I looked at the blackest areas of the darkness again – at the waste dump.

That lake, a square shape of about thirty meters on each side, seemed still in the darkness.

“Hey.”

As the insects kept cried, I asked.

“Do we really have to do that?”

Yoishi's white face, with light reflecting back at her, looked this way.

“He has nothing to do with this, right? He just died from an illness. So why does he have to be sunk in such a lonely place?”

“You're just feeling sorry for him.”

“Have you read this notebook? He just wanted a healthy body. And yet—”

My eyes had gotten used to the darkness, and all I saw was a lake of sludge.

“And yet he has to be sunk in such a lonely place?”

“Those that fall into darkness, must be treated as darkness.”

”... What?”

“All criminals have a history that causes them to stain their hands with crimes. They may have been abused by their parents. They may have been raised in an environment shunned by civilization. They may have been hurt to the point where their souls broke. And yet, once you've fallen to the darkness, you can't come back.”

Yoishi never stopped, and I just watched.

What to do. What should I do? Yoishi quickly continued her work. There was no hesitation in her actions. But her slender back stole my eyes away again. It looked to me like she was tying herself. Like she was trying to eliminate her dirtied self. Like that dream—

Where human Yoishi was kicking snake Yoishi.

“Stop.”

When I realized it, I was holding Yoishi's hand.

“Lets think of something else.”

“There is nothing else.”

“Like a temple, or an exorcist.”

“It's not something they can deal with.”

I couldn't stand her decisive tone.

“Why can you say that?”

I looked at her white face.

“You don't know until you've tried.”

“I do know.”

She pointed her obsidian eyes, darker than the surroundings, and said.

“Those that know darkness once, are drawn into their depths.”

I became speechless.

I thought of the author who disappeared into the damn on a rainy night. I thought that was just romanticism that existed in stories. I thought it was just middle school delusions. But when she said it, I could only accept that there was weight behind them.

Still—

Still, I shook my head.

I wanted to ask, is it alright be drawn in, to be swallowed.

What's the point of knowing the identity of darkness? What's the point of sinking to the bottom of the dam? People die eventually. You can leave the joy of darkness to that occasion. I love the mysterious. I'm excited by the depth of the world shown by the impossible. But just like my father prays to the mountain god when he cuts lumber from the mountain, the existence that we can't see, that reigns supreme over mere human strength – you can call it nature or whatever – it was like paying respect to them.

I learned that from mother. When I was a kid, I trembled in fear of the seizures that I couldn't predict. One morning, I was awakened at sunrise, and was taken to Mount Eboshi. We entered the mountain in the darkness, and I clung to mother's hand, rubbing my sleepy eyes as we climbed. I remember we couldn't see the foot of the mountain at night, and I was terrified by the demonic screeches of inexplicable animals. I climbed, terrified, clinging to my mother's hand as my only source of dependability. I didn't know why mother brought me to the mountain. But when we arrived at the summit, when mother pointed her finger at the rising sun, I made a voice that was no voice. The darkness was split asunder, and the sight of light staining everything in overpowering light made me experience awe. The miracle that created this world, the life on this world, I was shown proof that overpowered prophecies, that we were just allowed to live.

As I thought such random things—

“You should come to Fujieda one day.”

I said.

“I'll show you the light of sunrise on Mount Eboshi. If you can still say that then, say it.”

Yoishi's eyes were opened a bit wide in surprise.

– Ahh.

I'm stupid. I'm really stupid.

I thought, but I couldn't take back my words.

I stuck out my chest.

“That's that.”

“What you say lacks any logic whatsoever.”

She sighed, and I couldn't fault her for it.

“Anyways, I'm not sinking him.”

I took the notebook from Yoishi, and embraced it.

Yoishi silently looked at me for a bit, and then.

“Do as you wish.”

She left those words coldly, turned her back to me, and left.

I know.

I know that I'm a wuss beyond saving, I know that well.

Basically, that was it. As you'd expect, I ignored Yoishi's warning and brought the notebook back home, and within a week, strange happenings popped up one after another.

For example, one raining morning.

On the bus ride to university, I saw it.

When I was holding onto the strap, I saw it just a bit away.

A man wearing a kamishimo, like you'd see in a historical drama. The color was faded, and he stood there. He wore a white hakama to go with the stained blue, which made him stand out, yet no one so much as glanced at him. Of course, cosplay was all the rage these days, so I looked away. However, when the bus arrived at a stop and I looked in that direction again, he was gone. I thought he had merely gotten off. Then I looked outside, and almost fainted. For some reason, he was standing on top of a building next to the main street. He was nonchalantly walking on top of the fencing on the roofs of buildings.

And then, during a lecture:

I heard the sound of a whistle. It was light and lonely, being carried by the wind. A wind chime, I thought, but then I realized that it wasn't coming from outside. It was emanating from the classroom, or more specifically, from beside me. I hurriedly glanced around, but, of course, no one was playing a flute. Or rather, if someone were blowing a flute during a lecture, the professor would shout in anger. I quickly suppressed my pounding heart and breathed deeply a few times. However, I still heard the flute. The melody wasn't long enough to follow, but it was also not short enough to ignore. And yet, the tune was firm and lingered in your head. I became scared and covered my ears. That moment, I felt goosebumps down my back. I could still hear it. I could hear it even though I was covering my ears. When I realized I was hearing it from inside my head, I covered my mouth to stop myself from screaming, and leaped out of the classroom.

During noon recess, it happened again when I was playing basketball with some university friends of mine in the gymnasium.

When I'd cut off the ball and was dribbling through opposing territory, the opposing player, who was part of the basketball team, did a quick cover. That moment, I saw someone raise their hand in the corner of my vision. I tossed a pass intended to bypass the opposing defense. However, what I heard was an out-of-bounds whistle, and my teammates asked, "What're you doing?"

"Huh? You were running there weren't you?"

I asked back, but my teammates answered, that's the wrong way.

I was confused as I kept playing, but during the match, I tossed a pass to someone only at the edge of my vision twice, to the irritation of my teammates.

... What was going on?

I figured something was wrong, and wandered outside the gymnasium. I went to the fountain at the side of the entrance, turned on the water and drank a gulp. Then I sat on the bench to the side, and raised my head. The sky was blindingly clear. But despite it being clear, I felt like something was dark. As if the world I was used to seeing was slightly foggy. Like an aged photo, there was a world I wasn't related to. It was as if I'd bid farewell to the world I used to be living in.

“I guess it's that thing's fault.”

The notebook was still in my house.

I brought it home in the end, but I kept it tied shut with Yoishi's shimenawa out of fear, and placed it at the back of my closet. So far, I had been resting peacefully, as nothing had happened since – but I must still have parts of me worried about it. This is probably why I was seeing strange things.

Just then, someone sat next to me.

I subconsciously slid over a bit for them–

But when I saw the shoes being worn, my heart skipped a beat.

It was a worn sneaker. Tied with blue laces, worn without socks.

My whole body froze, and I couldn't move.

I don't remember how I was even breathing.

Sound disappeared, and the world was covered with white fog–

I just continued sitting next to that.

“Nice weather.”

I heard a voice as what felt like an eternity passed.

I snapped my head up, and saw Ishikawa, who attended the same language class as me, smiling.

He was a pretty typical university student for this fairly well-to-do university.

“You okay?”

”... Uh, yeah.”

My body was able to move again. When I glanced to the side, there was no one sitting there anymore. I opened my fist, closed it. It moved. However, my palms were covered with sweat.

“Just off work?”

“No.”

“It looks like you haven't gotten enough sleep.”

Hahahah, Ishikawa laughed. He was incredibly capable at getting good work, good company, and good connections, so when I looked at him, I felt a bit ashamed at how silly my worries were.

“Hey, Nagito, listen.”

He put a moment's break before saying.

“That's edible.”

Those words made me intestinal juice churn. It felt like dirty factory liquid had been poured into my stomach. Overcome by a feeling of vomiting that was rising from my gut, I ran from there.

When I stood up and looked at Ishikawa's face, it looked different. Like a pure, black, inhuman thing. I was going nuts. In any case, I was at my limit, I thought.

That moment, the sky became cloudy. I thought the clouds had come out and looked up, but it was still bright and sunny. The clear sky stretched on forever. But it was dark. Just the area around me was dark. I kept running, pressed by that sensation. I ran through campus, heading toward the west wing.

Having broken off ties with Yoishi, there was only one person I could rely on.

“Krishna!”

I arrived in front of the room and banged on the steel door, but there was no response. I peered through the foggy glass, and listened, but I didn't sense anyone inside. I leaned against the wall and pulled out my cell phone. And then I called Krishna's cellphone, the number that had been written on the business card. The time it took until she picked up felt like forever, and I waited, gathering my breath.

”... Hello?”

I became teary at the voice I heard.

“Krishna, I'm in trouble.”

I felt like I was about to scream.

“What? What happened?”

“I think someone's possessing me.”

This time I definitely told her everything.

That I took the notebook from the hospital. That I'd kept silent about it. That Yoishi was going to throw it away, but I brought it back home. And that my life was crumbling apart.

I told her everything, and begged.

“Save me, please.”

On the other side of the phone, Krishna went silent.

I was prepared to hear her, “you're hopeless.” I didn't care how much she scolded me. I didn't care if she insulted me. Even then, she should be able to come up with something.

“Well, what I can say.”

I heard Krishna's voice.

“Is that I can't help you.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I'm in Aomori.”

”– Huh?”

Come to think of it, her voice did sound distant.

“Wait... why'd you go to Aomori?”

“To correct my spine.”

“Why'd you go to Aomori to correct your spine—”

“The spine is an air duct. Well, it'd be a long explanation, so whatever. Anyways my teacher's going to talk.”

– Teacher?

Ahh, Krishna did mention having a teacher... is she with that person?

As I was sorting things out in my head.

“Yo! G'day.”

I heard a bright male voice. I heard Aomori, so I expected some stoic voice, imagining a grandmother-like teacher, so this took some air out of me.

“Well, first I want to check your situation. Is there water nearby?”

“Water.”

I looked around, and saw a sink at the end of the hall.

“Yes.”

“Alright, wash your hands. And the back of your neck.”

I dashed over and did as he told.

“Done.”

“Good. Now when you've washed yourself well, put out your left arm.”

I did that, too.

“Lightly close your fist, and then repeat the sutra I'm about to tell you seven times.”

I frantically nodded, and repeated the sutra he whispered seven times.

“Done? Now write '鬼の字' (letter of ogre) with a finger from your right-hand on each of your fingers, then blow hard on them, and as you do that, listen carefully.”

I didn't understand. I didn't understand, but I listened.

My opened hand was drenched in sweat, and my fingers twitched from stress.

”– now.”

His voice suddenly became lower.

“Which finger is trembling?”

... Umm.

My middle finger was trembling a lot, and my medicine finger was trembling with it.

I told him my middle finger, and the man on the other side of the line went silent.

“Um... hello?”

... Don't suddenly go silent, man, it's scary.

“Hey. Can you hear me? Is it bad if it's the middle finger?”

I shouted, and from the other side of the phone came a stupidly bright voice.

“OUT!”

... Hey.

”... Hello? Um, Nagi!”

”... Ah, Krishna.”

“Can you hear me? Are you ok?”

I had lost consciousness for a moment from that OUT! shout, apparently.

I'd slumped over the sink.

”... Where'd that bastard go?”

I felt anger bubbling forth and asked.

“Teacher's using spiritual vision on you right now.”

Krishna said from the other side of the phone.

“Well, we don't have a photo so all we're doing is gathering information and thinking of a direction. We can't figure out what's possessing you and why.”

“Is that teacher someone trustworthy?”

I asked, and Krishna laughed a bit.

“Who knows, he's an oddball. But his opinions are never wrong. I can guarantee that.”

I didn't really get it, but the way she said that annoyed me. Was it jealousy of the trust she showed? Or maybe it was because that bastard shouted OUT! like it was not his business. I didn't get it, but I decided not to trust that guy.

“So, what was with the trembling finger?”

“That was a Japanese type of curse for **Shisoushikibetsunodaiji**. It lets him figure out what type of ghost is possessing you.”

“What did he mean by out?”

“Teacher said he didn't really believe it, but – the middle finger isn't a normal ghost.”

“Not a normal ghost... then what?”

“If I had to give a word, a god.”

”... Huh?”

“A high god or a demonic god – whatever the case, it's not a normal aimless ghost.”

Wait. Why's that possessing me – I thought, but then I remembered.

Come to think of it, Yoishi and I had snuck into a shrine at night and cut off a shimenawa. But wait, I wasn't the one that cut it, and I apologized plenty. I understand it's not a forgivable offense, but this is pretty over the top.

“In any case, we'll come back to Tokyo immediately. It'll be night by the time we arrive I think, so take a memo of what what we're going to tell you.”

I checked my pockets but there was no paper, so I bowed to a female student that was passing by, and borrowed a paper and pen.

And I said go on, to Krishna on the other side of the phone.

“First, throw away that notebook.”

She said.

“The location should be somewhere people don't go. The waste dump that you and Yoishi went to should be fine.”

But I still had some resistance.

“Do I really have to do that?”

“I sort of understand how you feel. But that's the root of everything.”

“Why? What did that child–”

“Probably, the clump of countless souls are stuck to that notebook.”

I felt like a lot of scattered things were becoming connected by those words.

“I told you ghosts that have lost their purpose seek purpose? I don't know who wrote the words onto the wall. But together, they gave ghosts purpose, and it's probable that that's what's causing everything.”

– I see. So that's how it was.

That's why Yoishi said to throw that away.

And Krishna said the words were bad.

Still, I had to swallow my refusal that was just at the tip of my tongue.

He was, me. He was just suffering. He just wanted help. He just wanted to jump around and laugh with everyone.

“Nagi, listen. That kid's already dead.”

She boomed.

“He's not in this world anymore. As long as you keep acting compassionate to that kid, you're never going to be able to shed the ghosts.”

I.

I.

I–

I was about to say something back, when I noticed. I opened my trembling left hand. And the medicine finger was beginning to tremble even more than the middle finger.

“Um, Krishna.”

I said with a trembling voice.

“Um, my medicine finger is trembling really hard, too.”

”– Huh?”

“Is this.”

And then the cell phone became filled with static.

Suddenly, I could hear something that sounded like bubbling on the surface of water.

“Huh...? Hello?”

“H... hello...?”

Somewhere far away, I could hear Krishna's voice. But it was no longer a conversation.

Static, then bubbles. And mixed in, I heard a low voice. Countless human voices combined—

“Don't listen!”

Krishna suddenly shouted.

“D- don't listen, then what should I do?”

And then the phone cut out.

“K- Krishna?”

I tried calling back a number of times, but the phone never connected.

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5

... What should I do?

The sun was setting, and I'd been desperately clinging to sunlight, but I was about to run out of places to go.

Anyways, to where people are – to a noisy place with lots of people—

All of a sudden, I'd dragged myself to the lecture hall across from the courtyard.

However—

My feet stopped in front of the glass door to the lecture hall.

Inside the classroom, a hundred-some odd students were seated, and a professor was writing on the blackboard on the podium. I could hear the sounds of notes being taken. I could hear the sound of chalk against the blackboard. The lecture hall was filled with the silent fervor of people doing what they're supposed to be doing.

I couldn't go in.

I felt ashamed. I was shamed toward my parents. I clawed at my hair. I was in Tokyo against the will of my parents, and was even indebted to my sister. It wasn't easy for my household to pay for tuition. And yet, what was I doing? I'd been mesmerized by the occult, gone to a place I

wasn't supposed to go, abandoned everything in a half-assed way, and gotten possessed. An idiot was just being an idiot and living an idiotic life.

Could I still return?

Could I still return to where I belonged?

As Yoishi said, as Krishna said, I should just throw away the notebook. But the immaturity inside me refused. It shouted that it still didn't feel like the right thing to do. Part of me wanted to throw it away, and another part wanted to hang on, and it was also me that stood here dumbfounded. It was me that was tormented by those complex feelings, and it was me bothering lots of people, and it was me that stepped further and further away from the path I should be taken. Many of me killed each other inside my head, punching each other, stabbing each other, tearing at each other, tearing them apart. A vicious war continued, and all of me died. At the end, I stopped. I stopped thinking, and the me that was no longer anything stared at the classroom – and saw the me I didn't know.

The seat I was always sitting in – the far right seat on the fifth row from the front.

I was sitting there.

With a carefree look, looking bored, I was attending the lecture.

That moment, it felt like something inside me crumbled.

– Was it reversed?

– Was I the ghost, and he the real thing?

I could no longer see things as reality. I felt like something that had been created after the movie had been completed. My reality was just connected to the world through a thin strand. It was that simple to cut it off. Like Zippo's friend, the strand was cut one day, and you could never go back.

I wobbled away from the lecture hall, and sat down on a bench.

I clutched my hair with both hands. I could hear the sound of cars, like white noise, and the dark trees and bulletin boards and flower pots in front of me, they all looked like giant, made-up tools.

The normalcy of this place was suddenly extinguished.

I finally understood how terrifying that was. My values shook. I didn't know where I stood. I realized I was completely pointless. That moment, I didn't even have any tears. Because it was pointless. What was the point of a pointless thing doing something pointless? Emptiness only gave birth to emptiness.

– How does it feel to be scared?

Yoishi had asked me.

Yoishi, I get it.

This is fear. To lose your place.

– This.

I raised my head, and in front of me was a white face.

Mitsurugi Yoishi's long, black hair was flowing in the wind, and her big eyes were looking at me.

“At this rate, you're going to die.”

The high school girl in a uniform stood out on the evening university campus.

The university students walking by glanced in our direction as they went.

“Why do you wish to carry that person's darkness – to the point of suffering this much?”

Yoishi's glass bead-like eyes lacked the usual hollowness.

Instead, there was light that wanted to know something other than “fear.”

“Why...”

Why? I didn't know. I didn't know, that's why I was suffering. I couldn't answer that question now. So I just talked, not knowing why.

”... isn't that normal?”

”– what?”

“If someone's carrying something that heavy... don't you usually help?”

“Even if it's beyond your control?”

The words left me speechless.

I didn't know. That's why I'd been sticking my hand in so many things and then leaving them half-assed. Then should I not have stuck my hand in them? Is that it?

“Beyond my control – eh, shit.”

I clawed through my hair.

“It's not like I'm sticking my hand into everything I see. There's a basis—”

“Basis?”

“Because, if I were to do that naturally – it'd only be for **friends**.”

I said that word, and was surprised.

To be honest, the death boy wasn't a friend. I don't know how he looks and I'd never talked to him, of course. But I shared his pain. I was in the same state of suffering. As a kid, to have felt death nearby, his wish wasn't someone else's business. Please fix my sickness. When I first saw those words, I had felt that in my soul.

– I can't do anything, but I can be with you.

That's why I took the notebook with me. The way my mother had stayed with me, holding my hand until the seizure had passed for hours. It was the only port for me in the middle of a sea of fear. Just by having one person by your side, people can overcome things, I wanted to teach him.

”– I'm an idiot.”

I'd started crying.

“An idiot,” I was repeating.

“Indeed, it's not logical.”

Yoishi silently whispered, and then she suddenly pulled a cell phone from her pocket.

I thought she was going to call someone, but suddenly she began moving her fingers at a frenetic pace.

I thought she was sending someone a message, but her finger speed was unthinkable. Without blinking, Yoishi continued pounding away with her thumb, like a broken automated doll that was repeating the same motion. A drop of sweat appeared on her forehead, then stuck to her hair, and she stood there without moving, standing with her legs slightly apart. Only her thumb roared at a high speed.

I stared, jaw agape—

And it continued for almost an hour.

Our surroundings had become entirely covered in darkness, and sometimes a patrolling security guard came by, and I would bow my head, saying, “Wait a bit for her please.” That's how much urgency her fingertips seemed to have.

The typing that seemed to go on forever suddenly stopped.

And Yoishi's limbs immediately lost strength, having cut off the immense level of concentration. Yoishi crumbled to the ground – and I quickly caught her. For the first time, I found out she was extremely light.

“Hey, are you okay?”

I asked, and she nodded slightly.

”...What were you doing?”

But she didn't answer, instead saying an inexplicable, “How comfortable.”

“But, this should solve everything.”

And with that–

Yoishi's eyes rolled up and she lost consciousness.

Late at night that same day.

“Are you alright?”

Krishna shouted, jumping into my room, and when she saw Yoishi lying in my blanket, she began opening and closing her mouth.

“Ah... oh... you.”

”... Yes?”

“You, a high school girl... are you serious! What're you doing bringing a high school girl into your room! And sh- sh- she's sleeping in your blanket!”

She began blushing and shouting.

Maybe this person was extremely weak to that type of topic?

“Well well, Krishna, calm down.”

Karasu arrived then.

Changing the wet towel on Yoishi's forehead, she explained for me.

“When I'd come to pick up my belongings, Nagi was carrying this girl on his back and crying 'she collapsed she collapsed.' And when I looked, she had quite a fever. My room's a warehouse and has no blankets, so we gave her medicine and lay her down here.”

That's how it is, and still seated straight, I shot Krishna an insulted look.

“I- I see – sorry. And, are you alright?”

She said, and Krishna placed a big travel bag at the edge of the room and looked at me. I noticed that there was a bit of displacement between her shoulder and her head.

“I don't know... but Yoishi was saying that everything should be solved.”

“Say what?”

“I don't know what she's doing, and I really don't know what she did this time.”

Krishna sank to her butt on the spot, and sighed. She must have really rushed over from Aomori. I felt sorry for her faintness.

“I'm sorry. I've bothered you quite a bit.”

I lowered my head deeply, and she venomously replied, definitely.

“It was quite hectic. I couldn't connect to your cell phone anymore, and our cell phone got wrecked a bit – anyways, I'll tell you what teacher said. The results of your spiritual vision.”

She pulled out a thick memopad from her bag and began reading.

“First – the result of the “Shisoushikibetsunodaiji,” you said your middle finger trembled. The middle finger, as we mentioned over the phone, is a high god or a demonic god, but afterwards you said your medicine finger also moved, right? If you said that earlier we would have reacted differently.”

“What do you mean?”

“The medicine finger means a living ghost.”

”... Huh?”

No, wait.

Living ghost? Like, where jealous or hatred become a spiritual form...

“Yes, that living ghost. The person who fired it doesn't realize it either, a rather bothersome spiritual obstruction.”

Krishna continued, but it didn't make sense to me.

“In other words? I was going through this, but the person who fired that off is just living happily every day?”

“Well, yes.”

I instantly became angry. I'd been put through this much despair and fear, so I was overcome with rage.

“Who? I want to punch them.”

I said, and Krishna shrugged her shoulders, that'd be pretty tough.

“Feel like going around punching every occult-lover around the nation?”

”..... Around the nation?”

“Well, to be specific, probably almost everyone around the Tokyo region. Because the rumors about the 'hospital that grants wishes' spread quite oddly around the Tokyo locale. In other words, every person who feels a hint of hope from the idiotic information that the hospital grants wishes – their wishes became a living ghost, gathered together with that hospital as a home, and became an incredibly large spiritual clump.”

“Then, the man I saw wearing a kamishimo–”

“Probably a ghost floating about in the area. For a clump of spiritual forms, the ones that have the most memories are the ones that gain superiority. I said ghosts float about when they've lost sight of their purpose, but basically, that means the true suspect behind this incident is that huge spiritual form. The large, floating ghost and the living ghosts then further combined, gathered around the urban legend that 'wishes come true,' and became as powerful as a god.”

I was aghast, and Krishna turned the page and began reading the next page.

“And another. There's a device that amplifies living ghosts.”

“Device?”

“The **internet**.”

Krishna pushed her red-framed glasses up with her middle finger, and stared at me.

“Ahh, it's pretty stupid – the fuss over that hospital on the internet. It's not like putting something randomly in the hospital in the proper position would be enough to grant a wish, and nobody's wish really came true. However, it is a place with that much focused emotion. I'm sure one or two ghosts existed. So they go there for a selfish wish, and then end up hurt. What do people do, then?”

”... Scum.”

Everything was coming together.

Slowly, the feeling of hope would inflate. They would go there, braving fear. Yet, nothing happened. Wishes were never granted. I would feel ashamed for believing such a thing – but there are people who refuse to let themselves be the only ones fooled.

“Yes – such a pitiful, helpless gathering of malice in letter form. The twisted desires transform into malice, and those call even crueler thoughts. The urban legend of 'the hospital that grants wishes' was born this way.”

That's why Yoishi said it was pathetic.

That's why she said ghosts exist on the internet.

– I'd understood to that point, but I realized there were still other mysteries. Like the incident last year at that hospital. Where Yoishi alone had disappeared from the others, but there was a difference in their memories. How was that explained?

I asked, and Krishna shot me a doubtful look. She was probably worried about my mental stability. But I begged.

“Tell me. I mean, if that mystery isn't solved, I feel like I'm going to die of shock from the imagination inside me.”

“Well, yes... maybe. You're quite delusional.”

She said, insulting me, and then explained.

“It's simple. Because **everyone Yoishi was with was a living ghost.**”

Those words gave me goosebumps.

Within that endless darkness–

I imagined Yoishi walking alongside living ghosts enjoying evil delusions.

“The members other than Yoishi had probably gone there to have a wish granted. In other words, when they saw the words on the wall, they wondered what was needed to grant their wish. And they wished on their hearts quite heavily. Yoishi probably saw that.”

And then with a big of an envious look, Krishna looked at the sleeping Yoishi.

“This girl can probably see ghosts.”

“Then Zippo's friend, only mumbling Yoishi—”

“Living ghosts are a clump of dirty ego that people don't want others to know. Imagine having this girl whisper those to you.”

I remembered Krishna's words some time ago.

That Yoishi easily crosses the boundaries.

Yoishi's words are filled with things humans must not know.

So her words always sway us, who live on this side.

I was still fortunately standing on this side, but—

There was always the possibility that I would not make it back to this world.

And Zippo's friend was not able to.

“Anyways—”

Krishna said, scratching her head.

“In this case, we have to admit fault, too. Compared to the horror stories of old, that took time to change and grow in strength, urban legends these days spread quickly along the internet, and eventually, result in explosive growth. There's no root behind them. It was just an irresponsible post by someone that causes reactions and thus a landing spot. They end up summoning a real one. They say the darkness lacking any source whatsoever is the real thrill of the occult – but in this case, a symbol appearing where things gathered to begin with was the start of everything.”

“That was, the words on the note?”

I asked, and Krishna sadly nodded.

“That's how compelling his feelings were.”

– Please fix my sickness.

Those lonely words reappeared in front of my eyes.

Wanting to play outside, wanting to leave the hospital, wanting to go to school, wanting to eat a lot, wanting to play games.

To the bitter end, he returned with those wants.

“Pure, yet powerful words – the Japanese people of old called that the power of language.”

Krishna concluded.

Silence filled my room, and we could only hear the low rumbling of the refrigerator.

“But still.”

Karasu said, as we were sitting there in silence.

“Does that, really, solve everything?”

... That was it.

To be honest, I'd been wondering that myself. Was it possible to exorcise a god-class spiritual form? What did Yoishi do on her cell phone? Why did she look so satisfied before losing consciousness, saying that it was comfortable: that still bothered me.

Indeed, said Krishna, and she glanced at Yoishi's white face, as she slept like she was dead.

“She said she solved everything, right?”

“Yes.”

“Hmph.”

Pushing up her glasses, which had slid down a bit, she snorted.

“Well, we'll see. Truthfully, I don't sense much from you right now, and I'm personally curious as to how Mitsurugi Yoishi exorcised all of that.”

I had also grown tired of thinking about all of these complicated things. My body still hurt, still felt heavy, and my mind wasn't fully cleared yet. I could sleep at any moment.

“Nagi, if you want to sleep, you can use my room.”

Karasu laughed, as I stifled a yawn that probably came about from relief.

“You'd be overwhelmed if you were to sleep in the same room as a high school girl, right? What youth.”

W- w- what is she talking about?

I was about to say, but Krishna was the one who spoke.

“Y- you shouldn't, Nagi! How... vulgar... you can't you can't.”

She was blushing as she flailed about, and Karasu calmed her down a bit and sat next to Yoishi. Then, she turned the towel over and smiled.

“I see – this girl is Yoishi. Even though she looks so cute asleep.”

Whispered Karasu, with a fond look, but–

Well, as long as she stops vomiting and takes a bath every day, I would agree.

“Nagi.”

Krishna said to my back.

“You've done plenty.”

”.....”

“I'll responsibly send off that book where it belongs. I won't treat it with disrespect. Understand?”

I suddenly felt like crying–

So I looked away, and nodded repeatedly.

After that, my body felt lighter day by day.

Strange things stopped happening. I didn't see the man in a kamishimo. I didn't hear the sound of flutes. I didn't sense creepy people. And more than anything, the world was bright enough for me to want to skip around.

On such a day, when I'd recovered quite a bit, I passed by the main gate of the feeder school on my way to Krishna's room in the west wing. I gazed at the high school students passing by, and wondered about Yoishi.

The next morning, when Karasu and I had gone back to my room from the warehouse, she was already gone. There was no letter or anything, but the blankets were folded neatly. I fearfully took a whiff, but only the scent of my shampoo remained. That was the last I saw of her.

– In any case, I should give at least a word of thanks.

Is what I thought, as I waited for Yoishi to come out, but she didn't. Eventually I gave up and asked a random student about Mitsurugi Yoishi.

“She's probably still in the library.”

I heard. She was apparently a problem child that rarely came to school. And she emitted an aura which suggested that she didn't want to interact with other students, which I could totally imagine.

So, I hurried to the city library, which was under five minutes away, on my mama-cycle.

I passed by the receptionist, and glanced through the reading seats, and found Yoishi by the far window. She was mesmerized by a thick book.

“Yo, what're you reading?”

I called out, and she answered without lifting her head.

“Kürten's manuscript.”

“Who's that? An author?”

I sat across from her and asked, and she shook her head.

“A famous German serial killer. His murders were so abnormal people couldn't arrest him until he turned himself in.”

I was exasperated, but she continued with a bewitched expression.

“Kürten's orgasms, where he ejaculates while killing, are very interesting.”

I took a peek, and it was a book with gross monochrome photographs that made you want to look away.

“Oh, well.”

I mumbled, and said what I had come to say.

“I don't know what you did, but my body feels lighter. I stopped seeing weird things, too. And Krishna took care of that notebook. In any case, you saved me quite a bit. Thanks.”

I bowed my head.

“That's good.”

She mumbled, and she grabbed the book and bag as she stood up.

She carefully returned the book to the shelf, and began walking to the entrance.

– So, what did you do?

I was about to ask, but this time I restrained myself. Krishna said I had no capacity for learning, but that wasn't true. I had room to grow. I understood that this was as far as I could go. This time I really, painfully learned. So I restrained myself, and saw her off as she walked away.

However, after a few meters, she seemed to remember something, as she turned around.

She came back near me, leaned in, and whispered in my ear.

“You shouldn't look at websites related to that abandoned hospital for a while.”

”... Huh?”

“Farewell.”

And with that, she walked away.

I stood there dumbfounded for a bit–

But something bubbled forth, an immense level of curiosity.

No, wait, stop that. I'm the type that goes when I'm told not to go. I'd been like this all my life. And of course, I could already imagine myself crying from this, but – I'd realized I'd already taken my cell phone from my pocket. Just a bit. Just let me take a quick peek, and if it was dangerous, I'll run away. I told myself.

I immediately accessed the internet, and randomly did a search for “Hachiouji” “abandoned hospital” “wish.” A bunch of pages I'd looked at before appeared, and I opened the first one.

However–

”... What the hell.”

I was surprised, and checked other sites.

”... the same.”

Each site had the respective threads abandoned after a flurry of posts. The day they stopped being posted in was exactly a week ago. They matched the time and date that Yoishi had been typing into her phone.

“She wrote this?”

Fearfully, I read the post.

And at the top of the post, I immediately understood.

They all began with that famous line.

“You alone are responsible for reading this story. Please understand as you continue.”

The self-responsibility-type horror story that was famous around the internet.

They say that just by reading, you begin experiencing the paranormal, and they always have odd lacks of closure. Some say that the text itself contain the words for summoning ghosts hidden within, and others rumor that the words are designed to ward away guardian spirits.

I read a bit more and immediately understood. No matter who read it, it was apparent the story was related to the “abandoned hospital.”

”... I see, that's a nifty idea.”

To remove the will hovering about the abandoned hospital, you just needed to make it taboo.

It was a story of a girl attracted to the “abandoned hospital” that slowly stepped foot into a world of madness.

I was drawn in from the beginning. The words were filled with reality, and the depictions of personalities crumbling apart were powerful. The somewhat twisted backdrop felt very real, and the horror stories she spoke of, the real ones with a bit of a strange feeling, were written in such a way that there was an odd sense of discomfort left by them. Yoishi was able to write like this? I was surprised, but at the same time, I wanted to read the end.

In the library, as the sun set, I found myself clutching my cell phone to me as I read, entranced by the story. Her usage of hiragana to depict the crumbling minds was terrifying. It was like *Algernon*. Even as I thought that, I held my breath and kept reading. I felt a bit of coldness as I kept reading. And then, as the girl faced destiny and was stepping into the basement of the hospital—

Suddenly, the screen of my cell phone was covered.

When I looked up, Yoishi had returned and was reaching out with her hand.

And with her dark, deep eyes gazing upon me—

“You shouldn't read the end.”

And those were the most terrifying set of words I'd ever heard.

Raven Notes

『Raven Notes』 -- 「The Raven's Memorandum」 or 「The story that gets devoured」

☆☆☆

The writing that begins here is, to put it simply, written from memory.

You know, don't you feel better when you write down things that you don't get? Basically, it's a memo to sort out in writing what I couldn't figure out no matter how much I thought about it. Crudely put, a memorandum.

So if you're reading these words because you felt suspicion over my death, that's useless, I think. Even if you keep reading, you won't get any logical explanation for my “death”. Because of that, this writing may have the connotation of a “will,” but obviously as I currently write this, I am not dead. I don't intend to die – I'm living so blissfully that I was window-shopping for cute summer clothes just now, and licking my lips at baked custard at Ginza's [I Bischero](#), and I can't suppress my excitement over the offline meeting tonight. Then why am I writing this? I can only call it a sixth sense. I have no intention of dying, but I strongly feel the presence of death — this is the only way I can explain it.

“Ahh, I see, Karasu-san – you're a fortune-teller. Did you see your own death?”

Some people may ask, but that's not quite right. Generally, fortune-telling is a combination of cold reading – the “layering of bluffs” – and hot – using the “gifts of prior knowledge.” It's just an occult style of therapy combining those two and conversational skills and presentation. And you know, forget my own death, I can't even figure out if or when I'd marry – well, yeah, about that. That marriage thing. That's the start of this memorandum.

You know, I'm getting to the limit where it'll be tough for me to sell myself as a young, beautiful lady. I mean, I do want to marry. I know, I'm not blissful enough anymore to think that some handsome guy on a white horse will suddenly show up one day, but I do sometimes have enough hope that I'd like to scream up at God about when he'd like to prepare some happiness for me, even just a meeting. And – it's embarrassing to admit, but the other day, I decided to sign up for one of those, well, they call it, a dating site. Well they did offer the first month free. You can't know until you try. And then I typed in my info during sign-up, and then looked at the “want” profiles of others, and then I gasped and froze. Desired height? Desired education? Desired age? Huh? What? That sort of stuff doesn't have what I want! Do you think I'd come sidling up to such a salad-like appeal? Aren't there more, you know, values relevant to your core as a person? I'm trying to become the king of pirates, or I'm trying to master [hamon](#), or I'm preparing to move to Mars. And not just completely talk, you know, but the type of guy who has twinkles in his eyes as he says that, and tries to make it a reality. I don't get excited unless you're someone like that! I don't think it'd be fun being with you, otherwise! And then I tore out my hair and gave up. Gave up on marrying. My whole world had gone dark – but, that happened.

【Yo, hello! I'm the handsome you were waiting for!】

「.....」

【My dream is world domination. I love peoples' despair. Sometimes people shout, “you demon!” though, hahahah】

「.....」

【Huh? Hello, hello? Is this showing up?】

Of course, this was not a vocal conversation, but rather a conversation through text chat – that’s how I remember it, but as I said at the start, this is from memory, just a memo, just a memorandum. Just something that records my memories from my perspective. In other words, as I sat there despairing over dating sites, I had begun chatting with someone online who called themselves a demon.

【Huhhhh, you're Mr. Demon? Actually handsome?】

I typed into my keyboard, completely dubious.

【Of course, of course! When I was a kid there was no end to the admiration, saying that I gave people true freedom in Eden, and that I pull people up into the kingdom of light.】

【Then might you be the rumored Princess of Hell, he who was once called “Lucifer”?】

【No no no-, well, how should I put it, right, in terms of appearance, imagine a white face, blond hair, and golden wings, that should do it, no problem!】

【Not a bald old man trying to act prettier than he is?】

【Ow ow ow ow. As if!】

... I felt like I was destined to be stuck with painful people. This one felt more like a Mephistopheles than a Lucifer, but I had time until work. It'd been a while since I chatted, so I continued conversing, figuring that if he turned out to be really annoying I could just block him.

【So, what does Mr. Demon want?】

【Well, you could say it's about something that was forgotten and left behind. You disappeared without giving me back something. It was hard finding you!】

【Hmm, so I'd met Mr. Old Man before?】

【I'm not an old man! I'm quite handsome, thank you! Please drop that image of a bald man from your head!】

【You know, I was at least imagining Lord Lucifer from [Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry](#), but at the moment I only have Kodansha's publication of Sato Arifumi's Demon books.】

【Hey... wait, he's bald!】

【Surprised you knew... So – what was it? I'd met you somewhere? What was I meant to give you, my soul? When did I bind a contract with you?】

【Ahh, well about that, that's troublesome. I wonder where the myth of demons wanting souls started. I'm sad. I've never wanted such a thing.】

While chatting, I looked up the URL of the site I was connected to. It was a site I'd never heard of. And my browsing history only hinted that I'd jumped there from the dating site – maybe I'd clicked on a weird banner?

【Then, I'll give you a hint.】

Abruptly, The Old Demon Man said.

【It was when you were still a blossoming high school girl.】

【What?】

【Wasn't there a bizarre rumor that spread around class? About the “Man in blue clothing.”】

– Ahh, I vaguely remember. It was something like, if you answer “three questions” posed by a man wearing all blue, you die soon. I remember some story like that making the rounds in class.

【Yes, yes that. I'm that “Man in blue clothing!”】

.....

【..... hello?】

【Yes yes.】

【You remember, don't you? And if I remember correctly, I asked you “three questions,” too, but you managed to get off in a quite cunning way! It vexed me so much, that I've been looking for you this whole time!】

【Ahh, I feel like I'm beginning to remember.】

That scene that day vaguely reawakened in my brain. It felt like it came with a bitter emotion, but I couldn't remember why. Or... wait? If he's saying what he means...

【Did you – have something to do with Haruka-chan's death?】

And this time, the man ceased responding.

Suddenly, bitter things began rising from my gut. It was unpleasant, as if a nightmare from long ago had begun infesting the real world. And yet despite that – as if I were tearing away the cast on a healing wound, as if guided by an unseen hand, I questioned.

【And my mother, and my boyfriend at the time, their deaths too?】

【You say such scandalous things.】

– wrote the old man, after some time.

【All I did was ask questions, so I have no reason to be blamed for the misfortunes of others. If you don't want to answer, you just don't need to answer, after all.】

【That was part of the horror story about the “man in blue clothing,” wasn't it. But what was truly terrifying was what came afterwards. “You're supposed to just not answer, but it's over once the question is asked, because it's a question that compels you to answer.”】

【Pretty much. That's true, but you got away. I could never forget about that, and couldn't forgive it, so I'm here today to ask you about it. That method, if it were to spread, would begin to concern my existence.】

The man wrote, but – strange. I couldn't remember, at all.

Indeed, I vaguely remember the urban legend or horror about the “man in blue clothing” making the rounds during high school. But until it was mentioned just now, why that would relate to someone's death – in other words, Haruka-chan, my mother, and my boyfriend's death were not connected and remembered. Why? How did the three die? Why do I not remember correctly? Something significant had to have happened, but the map of my memory was torn and scattered, as if something had chewed it apart.

I glared at the laptop monitor, bit my nails, and tried to remember.

Right... I had met the “man in blue clothing” once. I also feel like I'd been asked “three questions.” And then, when I found out about the questions, I was on the verge of despair – but the moment I thought that, I had an awful feeling sweep over me, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

Bad. I felt like I shouldn't be remembering any further, so I typed on the keyboard, trying to close the chat – but it wouldn't let me log out. I tried closing the browser, but it wouldn't, either.

【It's futile. I've already reached you.】

His dancing words reappeared.

【Whether you close this computer, or destroy it, the next moment you connect to the internet, I can appear at your footsteps again. Think of it as having bookmarked you. So, how did you escape from me? What did you do, then? Will you remember?】

【But you know, if I can't remember, then there's no helping it.】

【Can't remember, can't remember! That's it, humans have that function, and that's why I hate you all. You live relying on an unreliable system called memories, yet you forget everything that you don't fancy. Or in other cases you maintain your ego by overwriting them with incorrect information. That's a problem though, to me. You know, like, bugs? It means the God that made this world wasn't omnipotent. There are always results that come from outside of expectations. What you did once falls under that, and I must eliminate it. If that were to spread, the whole world would be filled with chaos—】

And then I closed the laptop itself.

And then I stood up, went to the kitchen, took out a Menthol cigarette, and lit it. I turned on the ventilator, and took my time with the smoke, and returned to the table after a good bit of time. And then when I opened the laptop—

【How rude how rude! We were still talking, and suddenly!】

He was still there, so once more, I closed it.

Indeed, it seemed like we were still connected. I didn't know whether it was a real demon, or if it were just a new type of computer virus, but either way, my laptop had been taken hostage.

“God. All my customer data is in that laptop, too.”

When was the last time I backed up the data? Ahh, about half a year ago – or worse, maybe even last year. They do say your irresponsible attitude can come back to haunt you in times like this. I folded my arms. In any case, I couldn't throw away my laptop now, and if him appearing every time I connect to the internet is problematic. Proper attitudes should be taken toward stalkers, I thought, and then I sat down in the chair and opened the laptop.

【So, what do I need to do?】

【You just need to remember, what you forgot to give me. And how you were able to escape from me, the method.】

【But, after that I die, right? That result, after going through so much effort to remember, isn't that a sad result?】

【Sad? I'm the one who's sad! How much effort do you think it took to find you!】

Ahh, what a pain, I thought, but I had no real choice but to listen. The health of my laptop was on the line, and for better or for worse, I had someone to talk to, and it might turn out well if I kept conversing and if they accepted the result. The exorcist I was acquainted with said something like that, too. That in the end, exorcism is just persuasion. And since it seemed like I'd been able to escape from him before, so I should be able to do it a second time – at least, by logic.

And so, I crossed my legs in front of the laptop, and closed my eyes to remember that time.

○

Haruka-chan – I think her real name was Toonoki Haruka-chan.

Haruka-chan was a good girl. A bright girl, the kind who's in every classroom, popular with both the guys and the girls. She had fluffy, bright hair, and when she laughed a cute dimple appeared, and she was the type that warmed your heart, the type who you'd think had been brought up with tons of love.

But – my last impression of Haruka-chan was without a head.

One day, she jumped off of the school roof, and her head snapped off. Part of her head, stuck with the hair that was bright, and with inexplicable red and black lumps of meat scattered everywhere, was how she died. It was concluded to be suicide, but – if I remember correctly, after Haruka-chan passed away, that “man in blue clothing” rumor began to circulate.

They said that Haruka-chan had been bothered by the “man in blue clothing” that had been showing up in her dreams. That man in blue clothing had asked “three questions,” and rumor had it that Haruka-chan had answered the three questions and had been taken away because of that.

Of course, that was the type of urban legend that could be found anywhere, so it's the type of horror story you hear a lot among adolescent girls. At the time I was the type of kid who always took a slanted look at the world, so if you were to ask, I'd have to reply that I didn't believe it at all. Of course, I was heavily affected by Haruka-chan's death, but I probably smirked and laughed at my classmates, who cowered in fear of that rumor, thinking that if you're going to die answering, then you just don't need to answer.

●

And, having remembered that much – I felt myself being covered by a terribly cold feeling. My palms were covered with sweat.

【Continue.】

Was written when I looked at the LCD display of my laptop. I clicked my tongue once, exhaled deeply, and continued remembering.

●

And then around half a year after that—

Right, that day, I saw my mom in the city. It was an afternoon of a day that was so hot you would sweat just by standing, and I was in front of the train station, having left high school early — and noticed my mother beyond the crowd of laughing people. At the time, I had a bad relationship with my mom and didn't call out to her, but then I noticed. Right behind my mom walked a person in strange clothing.

He was covered from top to bottom in a bright blue suit. His shirt and necktie and shoes and hat were all blue, and the moment I thought *wow he's got terrible fashion senses!*, I also felt a chill go down my spine. Come to think of it, wouldn't that be what a “man in blue clothing” looks like? The man gradually crept closer to my mom from behind, and called out to her in front of a burger shop. My mom looked surprised when she turned around, and then she answered one or two words to his questions. I had an incredibly bad feeling, and began running. However, the crowd was worse than usual that day, so I couldn't get closer, and by the time I made it through, the man in blue clothing was gone. In the middle of a scene warped by heat vapor, my mother simply stood there dazed. I asked, “who was that?” but she only gave me a vague smile.

Again. This person never tells me the important things. Such a bratty — well, I was a brat then, that spoiled thought swept through me, and I felt idiotic for worrying over her, and I left her there.

Yes — the thought that this would be my last conversation with her never crossed my mind.

My mom hung herself shortly after.

While I was at school, she tied a curtain to the handrails off of the second-floor stairs, and because she was dangling from there, that was the first thing I saw when I came home and opened the door. There was no hint of crime, and a simple will was found, so it was wrapped up as a suicide — we weren't a family that spoke much, after all. My dad and brother both didn't know what bothered mom, either. But I alone attended the funeral with the feeling of having something stuck in my throat.

— Was it really suicide? The man in blue said something to mom. Was that the “three questions”? And what were the questions? Did Haruka-chan and mom die because they answered the questions? What is that “man in blue clothing” anyways?

I thought about that quite a bit—

Around that time, I finally began communicating with the girls who were friends with Haruka-chan.

“Hey, what did that 'man in blue clothing' ask Haruka-chan? What're the 'three questions'?”

I asked around, but no one wanted to talk about it, and no one told me anything. Eventually, the “man in blue clothing” had become a topic that no one in class wanted to touch. To speak about it meant you became related to it. The pale faces of my classmates looked like the dead to me.

– perhaps the “man in blue clothing” was a different form of the “grim reaper”.

When I thought of that, I began to rummage through writing on my own. I went to libraries here and there to research everything related to “grim reapers,” and searched online for things about “man in blue clothing” and “three questions/death.” However, such a story didn't exist anywhere. There were similar horror stories, but they all seemed like urban legends that were cobbled together using a slew of horror stories.

I wandered around, lost, and eventually decided to create a thread on the forum of an occult site I frequented.

【Three questions – the “man in blue clothing” thread】

It was a shady-looking title, but I thought maybe I'd be able to get some info anyways. But it only got spammed, and I was unable to get any info about the “man in blue clothing”.

Not knowing anything, another half-year or so passed–

I was living a gloomy life when I got a boyfriend.

He was a university student I met at my part-time job, and he confessed to me, but I turned him down at first. I felt like nothing had been truly resolved yet, so I was afraid of dragging someone else into the mess. However, he remained kind, bright and resolute – and in retrospect obviously, our conversations never touched upon the word “death”. Basically, he let me remember how to live a normal life again. I slowly opened my heart up to him, and began going out with him. They were warm days that would make me tear up for no reason, days I hadn't experienced in quite some time, but–

Yes, I shouldn't have dated him.

One weekday afternoon – I saw a dream. I think it was in the middle of midterms, and I was at home early afternoon, but I didn't feel like studying, lay down in bed, and ended up sleeping. In my dream, the “man in blue clothing” I had seen that day was slowly walking.

My heart thudded, and I stopped in my tracks in my dream.

I didn't want to have anything to do with him anymore. That was my honest feeling, I think. Having my life tossed about by such a vague existence was wrong. I thought. I would just wait for the man in blue clothing to pass by, and just as I'd crouched to hide behind something – my heart froze and thudded once more.

The man in blue clothing was following someone. And, I realized that was my boyfriend.

– W... wait, what? That person has nothing to do with this, right!?

I screamed a soundless scream, and tried to run after them to catch up. But my legs moved slowly, as if glued to the ground, and like that day, a wall of people got in my way. Between the people, I saw the “man in blue clothing” speaking to my boyfriend. My boyfriend turned around, with the expected surprised expression.

– No. Don't answer.

I cried and screamed, and then I finally realized. I began going out with him to curb my loneliness and sorrow. I thought the relationship was bittersweet even as it embraced me in warmth. But still, he made me realize that the world was still filled with color. He had smoothed out the thin strands of my psyche, and had saved me.

“If you've got a problem with me, say it to me!”

I screamed as I finally caught up, and grabbed the sleeve of the man in blue clothing.

And – then.

For the first time, I heard the voice of the man in blue clothing.

That low voice that I had heard somewhere, was asking my boyfriend.

“□□□□□?” “□□□□□?” “□□□□□?”

– the “three questions.”

– those questions, that they say you die if you answer.

I was supposed to have finally heard – but my consciousness was forcibly ripped away, and I woke from my dream.

I was on the bed in my room. The sun was still high in the sky, its light pouring into my room. I hadn't changed out from my school uniform, and was lying on my side in tears. The emotional remnants from the dream hadn't left yet, and my heart was racing. Conscious or not, I immediately woke up, and called my boyfriend's cellphone.

But he didn't pick up. The ringtone sounded fifteen times, and I cut off the call when it switched to his voice mail. No, maybe he's still in a lecture. Maybe he's just moving. I told myself that, but I remembered Haruka-chan's case, mom's case, and the freezing anxiety suffocated me. As if to escape, I faced my desk and pulled out Tarot cards from the drawer. It was a set I'd bought out of interest while I was researching the grim reaper. That time, I learned how to use them.

I calmed down my breathing, and placed the Tarot cards on the desk in [Major Arcana](#) form. Thinking hard about him, I asked the Tarot. However, his close future – the card that appeared shocked me. I shuffled the Tarot again, and this time placed them in [Minor Arcana](#) form. And then, once more, I knocked away the result with my hand, then I tried changing the spread to the [Celtic Cross](#), the [Hermit's Lamp](#), and the [Carterhough](#). But the result was always the same. I flew out of my room.

Tarot is just an appeasement.

You can put any sort of meaning to cards, and they exist just to comfort the anxious. I tried to think that, but I couldn't help but calculate the odds of five straight Tarot readings turning up the same result. 22 cards in the Major Arcana, 56 in the Minor Arcana. In other words – the first two alone meant a 1/1232 probability. Did – did this not mean something was absolute?

My boyfriend's university was in the neighboring town, so as I waited for the bus, in an effort to escape from my anxiety, I visited the occult site where I'd created the 【”man in blue clothing” thread】 for the first time in a while. Other than the meaningless spam, there were a lot of advertisements to adult sites, and–

Beyond that, I saw.

【I saw the blue-clothed man】

I stopped breathing when I saw those six words.

When I looked at the time of the post, it was just five minutes prior.

●

【– Oh?】

When I remembered that much, the old demon man wrote.

【The person posting on the forum knew me?】

【I... I think so.】

【Interesting. Do continue.】

●

... umm, because you interrupted, I don't remember where I was.

Right, maybe they're still there, I wrote a response in the thread.

【Where? Where did you see him? Who are you?】

While waiting for the bus, I refreshed the page over and over again. Eventually, the bus arrived, and I jumped in. When I sat down, I couldn't wait any longer, and posted once more.

【In my case, he appeared in my dream. I also saw him in reality. In both cases, he was speaking to someone I knew. And the people all die. What is that? Who is that man?】

I wrote, and I held my cellphone in my hands, as if praying to it.

It felt like an eternity passed before the response, but it probably had not been a minute. Eventually, that whoever appeared and responded.

【Did you answer his questions?】

My heart thudded, and before I could think of how to answer, the next post appeared.

【If that's the case, then I don't think that person can be saved.】

I wrote.

【Do you know the content of those questions?】

【I know.】

【Tell me. What're the questions? Is there a way of being saved after being asked?】

【There is, but I can't really recommend it.】

【It's still better than dying! Tell me!】

And then—

That inexplicable post appeared.

【Hey, are you scared?】

..... what?

【Are you, scared, right now?】

【How does it feel to be afraid?】

I felt chilled by those words, posted in succession.

– What is this person?

Of course I'm afraid! Are you stupid? Or, what? Is this person a psycho that scatters occult fantasies everywhere? I mean, not that I can speak for others, but it's the kind of person posting on this forum during midday, so it might be some weirdo who's too obsessed with the occult – and just as I was pondering whether it was worth continuing, those words appeared.

【I need to go now.】

– What? Go?

【I need to do my homework.】

..... H-homework? Then – what? Is this an elementary school kid? Was I being teased by an elementary school kid? No – no, who cares if they're in elementary school. Even if it's an urban legend, if there's an answer, I wanted to know. Two acquaintances had died to that “man in blue clothing.” Regardless of whether this person is an elementary school student or not, this was my one rope that had been extended down into Hell. In this dark world, where I couldn't even make out my own feet, with deep darkness extending everywhere, was this one single rope. If they became displeased and disappeared into the internet, it would truly be over–

I thought, and with my trembling fingers, I responded.

【I'm scared.】 【I'm really scared.】

I held back my tears and continued posting.

【So, please. Tell me what's asked, and how to be saved.】

Then–

The answer was given from the other side of the internet.

【The blue-clothed first asks, “What is my name?”】

– Name?

【The next question is, “What is the name of my child?”】

– Child? Why? That blue-clothed man is the type to have a child?

【And then finally, this is the trick, but the blue-clothed will ask for the contents of the box. Don't fall for it.】

.... Trick? Box? Don't be fooled – but I don't get it at all. I don't understand at all, but alright. Understood. I was just about to accidentally miss my stop, so I hurriedly shouted and mashed the stopping bell, and jumped off. And then as I ran toward the university, I called my boyfriend's phone again. After a few rings, I heard a familiar voice asking, “hello,” and that moment, I felt tears well up in my eyes.

”..... Ahhh, you're alive! Thank god!”

《What're you on about?》

“Nevermind, it's nothing. Please, listen. If you love me, remember what I'm going to say. Even if it's in your dream, remember.”

《Hey, hey, calm down.》

“Just listen! If someone you don't know asks 『what's my name,』 don't give anyone's name. If they ask 『what's my child's name?』 don't give anyone's name. And then–”

《How did you know?》

My heart froze with pain – at his words.

《I mean, the dream I saw. When I was dozing off during class. I was asked in my dream, by a guy in blue clothing. What's my name?》

“What – what did you say?”

《What, my name, Iida Kimihiko.》

“W- why? Why would you tell a stranger your name?”

《It wasn't a stranger.》

..... What?

《Because, the guy in blue clothing behind me》

As the rest of his words came toward me – an immense noise sounded from across the phone.

Someone's scream roared, and rolling metal sounded over it. The sound of something continuously falling onto the ground continued, and I could hear countless screams.

The cellphone remained to my ear.....

As my body heavily, hardened, and froze.

I could do nothing, I could not resist... the deep, dark, swamp.

All that was there – was an overabundance of despair.

○

That sound from across the receiver–

Was part of the campus building, which was currently being strengthened against earthquakes, suddenly falling off.

Countless students were milling about in the courtyard of the university Kimihiko attended, and I heard that as I made my way through the crowd. “A student was caught under it” “Where's the ambulance?” “Hurry up and help him out” but along with that I heard “It's too late” “There's no way he could have survived that.”

And then I – through a lot of people, saw.

Sticking out from between the piles of reddish-brown steel pipes, Kimihiko's sneaker. A familiar set of jeans. And around that, the ground was stained with a reddish-black liquid. I was overcome by a strong urge to vomit, and couldn't step forward anymore, and eventually was pushed into the crowd by the emergency crew and the faculty leading them.

After that – I don't remember. My head was hot, and there was confusion, like all the sounds were mixing together. I don't know how much time passed – but I was wobbling around, my hand still clutching the cell phone that was connected to Kimihiko's line. When I snapped out of it, I'd arrived at the rooftop garden of a station building that Kimihiko and I frequented, and was gazing at the university campus, dazed.

The scene reflected in my eyes was fogged white, as if I were dreaming. The early-summer wind swayed my hair, and the feeling of it sweeping through my uniform finally put words back in my throat.

”..... What..... Why..... Why is this happening? What's the man in blue clothing? What's going on and why's this happening?”

I scrunched my face, gripped the iron fencing around the rooftop, and repeated the questions to no one in particular. Maybe everything's a dream. Maybe I just misunderstood, that I just needed to go back to the university and Kimihiko would smile at me. That sneaker, those jeans, might have been someone else's – I tried to tell myself, but my legs wouldn't move.

I heard the sound of wings above me, and raised my head.

Several ravens had perched on the rooftop fence. Each of their obsidian eyes was directed toward me, and they cried as if jeering. Their crying made it appear as if they were trying to tell me something important, and yet, also as if they understood that it would never get through.

“Please... tell me...”

I glared at the ravens and said.

“If you know... what's happening, if you know.”

Please, tell me.

Just as I shouted that – I heard it.

“What's my name?”

It was so cold that I was about to shiver–

I slowly turned around, and before me was blue so bright that it felt like it would pierce my eyes.

●

..... That's right.

That day – I was asked that.

I definitely met the “man in blue clothing,” and was asked that question.

【... continue?】

Floated in text from across the internet.

【What I want to know is past that.】

Abruptly, the words jiggled.

– Is it truly alright to remember?

Right now, I was definitely being controlled by the other's pace. I felt like I was on a trolley headed straight toward the abyss. However, it was a trolley on rails that had no redirecting. There was no escape, or rather, I had no chance of winning this conversation from the start.

“Is the guy on the other side really...”

Along with the bad feelings rising up from my feet–

That scene spread itself out in my mind, unstoppable.

●

Blue, azure, cobalt, blue.

In the world filled with white fog, that showed up. Suit, shirt, necktie, slacks, and the hat worn over his eyes – someone stood there in all blue, as if swallowed up by the sky.

“Y... you...”

It felt like time had stopped there, and I heard his voice like the voice of someone else.

“What is my name?”

It felt nostalgic, familiar, and, in a way, it gave me an uneasy feeling, his voice. And while letting off such a cold-to-the-core air – he asked, pleasantly.

“Y... you... you're...”

And then, the blue-clothed slowly raised his hat, and showed me the face beneath.

Yes – there.

Holding the hat in one hand, her long, black hair flowing.

Was me.

Covered entirely in blue, and smiling, that was, without a doubt, “me”.

I felt an immense urge to vomit, but I held that back, and finally understood. That familiar-sounding voice came with the weirdness of hearing a recording of your own voice. As if your own shadow was acting differently from you, as if something that shouldn't be revolting revolted, I felt the terror of seeing the impossible.

“What is the name of my child?”

Chuckling at my expression – the blue-clothed continued questioning.

However, that face.

”.....!!?”

On the face on top of the blue clothing, instead of my face, was the ashen face of my dead mom.

I see – I remember now. The despair I forgot I had felt at the time was finally re-materializing.

You ask for your own name. Your mother asks for her child's name. In either case, the answer is “your name”. That's why people end up answering their name to the blue-clothed questions.

And then this time, the blue-clothed took something out of its suit pocket. But I understood without even seeing it. The final question was a box, I think.

“What is inside this box?”

What the blue-clothed presented with that expected question – was a sleek, white, porcelain funerary urn. The face of the blue-clothed crumbled. Flesh peeled off, and the white, cracked skull became visible.

– Grim Reaper.

That was the case, after all. This was a Grim Reaper. And the “three questions” were there to guide me toward saying “my name” in different ways. However – I couldn't figure out why it was using such a roundabout means. The meaning behind the blue clothing, where it comes from, and why only I can see it. I didn't know, but in any case, I understood that if I answered this question, the next one to be taken would be me. I stood my ground with my trembling legs, and pursed my lips. I clenched my teeth, and stood defiant against answering a thing.

More than fear – my body trembled out of vexation.

I had always thought that facing death straight on would be a more resigned, refreshing affair. You know, like hearing soothing hymns in an endless world filled with light, or being able to see the Sanzu River in a world filled with white mist. But instead, I was disappointed that it was this roundabout, underhanded way. That urn probably contained my name. This asshole was trying to get me to say my name using such different ways. It was too underhanded. It was too vile. I wanted to hit back even a little bit, and then – I noticed the name in the urn.

○○由貴子 (Yukiko).

My name was there, but one of the letters was wrong.

My name is ○○由起子. No matter what happens, that I grow up to be a girl that can always wake up with my own strength, was the hope behind my name. I remembered my mom, with her effusive smile, as she explained that to me. When nothing had happened yet between my mom and I.

..... Why had my mom and I grown so distant?

..... Why had I grown to distance myself from her?

It was since that day that I learned my mom still kept a letter from an old lover. It's not an easy thing to throw away peoples' feelings, my mom said, but I couldn't help but feel like that was an act of betrayal toward the family. But I realized when I saw that letter during her funeral. That old lover had long since passed away. He was an existence that couldn't affect our family anymore. Maybe my mom couldn't throw it away because he had passed away. Maybe she thought that if she were to throw away the proof of his life, then he would truly be dead.

Those thoughts suddenly swept through me – and the world became clouded over.

As long as you're alive, you can't overwrite sad things with happy things. But, the dead can't come back. You can't talk to them anymore – mom was the one who said that.

“Hey, you.....”

Anger built up inside me, and I opened my mouth.

“If you're a grim reaper – don't get people's names wrong!”

My.

My name.

My name, which my mom so carefully gave me.

My name, when I shouted my correct name, that moment–

That color leaked in, into the white, foggy world.

– Red?

That was the color of a ransel.

There was one girl with a pure, red ransel on her back.

●

【– Her】

Just as the old man on the other side of the LCD typed,

”..... I see.”

I was also mumbling.

– I see, so that's how it was.

I was finally beginning to remember everything. I realized why my memories had faded.

“That was close.”

“You were asking for my name again, weren't you.”

My head became flushed with red at the brutal truth.

Yes – I hadn't forgotten.

My story had already been devoured.

“That day, what you'd been unable to hear, 'my name,' – you wanted me to remember the name I'd sealed away, and then say it, that's what you wanted me to do – isn't that right?”

●

“Don't fall for it.”

That time, that person who appeared on the occult site forum, the words that were posted came to mind. And those words came fresh, overlapping with the image of the little girl with the red ransel.

Yes, the person who posted that on the forum said.

Be careful of the final question.

Box. The name written inside.

My name, written incorrectly.

..... It was deliberate.

The blue-clothed wrote my name wrong on purpose.

Or rather... would a Grim Reaper really do that? Maybe it's not a Grim Reaper? Then what is this? And – who was that elementary school kid, and why did she know?

Then, I saw the blue-clothed slowly turn around. And then acknowledging the presence of the unexpected girl, it changed its posture.

And, silently accepting the gaze that must have looked like they were prepared to take her breath away, the girl moved.

She raised her small right arm, and pointed it.

At – the top of the rooftop fence. There, where previously there were only a few, were enough ravens to cover the sky in black, gazing at me as if ready to carry me to the other side. They were probably looking at me the whole time. And rather than interject, they simply observed. What the blue-clothed is, who the girl is, and what is happening, they understood it all, yet they just watched. As they have always done – and will continue to always, they will keep watching countless thoughts being extinguished in the endless river of time.

You shouldn't speak of it. If you speak of it, you become acquainted.

– Then, then, what should I do?

What should I do, having become acquainted so?

Then, I feel like I heard the echo of a wind chime that might have been placed and forgotten.

Whether that was the girl's voice – that was one thing I couldn't remember at all. But, those words that sounded like wind chimes suddenly descended into my head.

“Throw away your name.”

– Throw away my name? Why do I need to throw away my name?

But oddly, I understood that it was correct, and that it was the only way to escape. Otherwise, I would be pursued relentlessly until I died. But – but, that's impossible. This name is mine, and only mine. It's proof that I was born into this world, and was engraved into me with hopes and prayers. To throw that away meant to throw away what I held dear. If I throw away that name – then I would cease being me. I would cut ties with the family and friends and dear people that I had made ties to all this time.

I tearfully complained, but the girl with the ransel silently stared at me.

The girl simply let the wind play with her long, strange, black hair. Even though we stood so far apart, I could tell how beautiful her face was. Extremely, extremely, beautiful – no, that didn't do it justice. The girl was like a masterpiece bisque doll that a famous craftsman placed heart and soul into as a final work. A bizarre dissonance, one that made you feel like it couldn't possibly exist in this world. Those were the girl's eyes. Her face, as if blessed by God, and her eyes, as if loved by the Devil, contrasted and horrifically sublimated her beauty.

I felt like I was being swallowed by the dark eyes she stared at me with, and then the girl nodded slightly.

”..... Ah.”

When I realized it, I felt cold air knife across my skin. That was not coming from the blue-clothed, but rather from the black eyes of the girl with the red ransel, and when I realized that, the tears I'd been holding back flowed forth. I'd been holding back because I felt like crying was an admission of defeat, but – I couldn't hold back anymore.

– That girl already had no name. She'd long since thrown it away. Even... even though she was so young. She was still six or seven. But she'd already squeezed through something that had forced her to abandon her name, and had shown up just to tell me what to do.

“My name?”

And, then – the blue-clothed me asked, with a furious expression.

I managed to steady my knees, as I was about to topple over, and I looked at the black-haired girl, pleading. She was still pointing. Pointing at the ravens.

As I cried, I thought of my mom's smile.

– If you die, it's over. As long as you're alive, you'll find happy things. You can just store the name within your soul. Give it to the person who wants it.

I nodded–

And then the name in my heart cut through, and that day, I declared.

“I'm, Karasu^{[1](#)}.”

“I know everything, yet I travel the darkness between this shore and that shore without telling, Karasu.”



It was my room.

【Ahh – failed, again.】

When I came too, he only left behind those words, which felt like they were accompanied by a bitter laugh, and disappeared from the internet. I wiped the huge amount of sweat off my hands – and then closed the browser. It closed without any issues. I tried opening the browser again and looked at the browsing history, and it contained the dating site, but nothing afterwards.

I rubbed my eyes, and half-opened my mouth in exasperation. I took out a cigarette with my trembling fingers, and placed it in my mouth. Without lighting it, I sank back in my chair, and looked up at the ceiling.

– Jeez, really. Just, jeez.

I've lived since that day, having thrown my real name away. That's why I'd forgotten everything about that name.

“A memorandum indeed – quite a memorandum.”



After I wrote that, I stopped my fingers.

On the LCD display of my tablet terminal, were the words that I had engraved myself.

I quickly scanned through it again, and suddenly felt odd. At the same time, I wondered why I decided to write a memorandum, and felt terrified. I'd never even kept a diary before, so I thought about deleting it – but in the end, I saved the text, and placed it in a private folder. And then I turned off the terminal, and placed it in my bag.

I was alone in a taxi, going through the darkened city.

I squinted at the oncoming headlights, gazed absent-mindedly at the illumination in front of the train station, and thought. If I hadn't thrown away my name then – would I have really died young like Haruka-chan and mom and Kimihiko?

I didn't know. Did they die because the “blue-clothed” had appeared, or did the “blue-clothed” appear because their death was decided; I couldn't figure even that out. Speaking of not knowing – where I am, whether I'm alive, sometimes, I get confused. For instance, do the people outside of the window of this taxi actually exist? The countless bluish-white humanoid lights sometimes look like lighting for tropical fish, and the people feel like [Neon Tetra](#) swimming in an aquarium. An aquarium named an endless dream.

No – come to think of it, I hadn't dreamed in a while. But that was because I couldn't sleep deeply, and even though I must have been seeing things like dreams, I also felt a sense of loss, as if that scene had fundamentally been ripped away as payment for waking up in this world.

But, really, sometimes–

When I wake up, I feel the vestiges of something.

That was the sound of crying. I realized that it was like the voices of countless ravens crying somewhere.

As if they were trying to tell me something important, yet those voices that could never be understood, may have been engraved in my pure white dream world, sharply and deeply. Maybe it's the grudge of a raven somewhere that had died for me.

In the end, whether that blue-clothed was a demon, a grim reaper, or some wandering ghost, I never found out. Even so, I was sure that the true form of the blue-clothed was the time of death, and that it was like an unnamed stamp. I don't know why such an unfair existence wandered around this world, but it seemed that once you engrave your name, it functions.

And, because I had engraved a false name–

When that day comes, what sort of death will I face?

Not that I would know, having already died, but for some reason, I thought it wouldn't be a pretty death. At my funeral, I wouldn't have a pretty face for people to look at, and people would say you shouldn't look – no, it might even be a funeral where my corpse doesn't even look like one.

As if I were set upon by something that awaited my death for a long time, scattered about as if devouring my “death”–

And then, I abruptly thought of a word.

Lucifer Blue.

Wasn't that [blueish-white light](#) used to light aquariums called that?²⁾

“I see.”

I smiled coldly, and pointed my finger at the people on the other side of the window glass, meandering about like tropical fish. The tip of my finger touched the glass, and I found again that they cannot reach me.

From their perspective, it may be me, across the glass window, that looks like a tropical fish.

And then they must sometimes be stretching out their finger. The fingertips that I would never be able to see. Yet from their side, they can't find my place, either.

○

“Welcome! Alone?”

As soon as I entered the family restaurant for the offline meeting, I was greeted by a cute waitress.

“Hmm, well...”

I glanced around the store, with its bright pop music and – ahh, someone had arrived ahead of me.

The newbie to the occult site **Ikaigabuchi** that everyone knew of as a wuss was sitting alone, and writing a letter rather fervently.

I tried to creep up behind him, the host of today's offline meeting, when–

Suddenly, cold wind swept through my soul.

With that damp sense of death, the scene of that day suddenly reawakened.

That time, appearing on the rooftop, that little girl with the red ransel.

That inorganic beauty and lonesome bearing, was vividly drawn before me.

”– Ah, so that's how it is.”

If that girl from then truly existed, and still lived somewhere.

And maybe, if they were still struggling through the other side of the darkness alone.

I swallowed my words there, and silently closed my eyes.

The ravens always know everything. And they never speak of it.

That's why they're misfortune, and beauty. Because they can see what their words would bring about. Because in the end, others can't change peoples' destinies. Because they know how sinful it is to speak of what they know.

That became – starting over today – my principle.

..... What? Isn't fortune-telling a combination of cold reading and hot reading, an occult style of therapy? Yep, that's right, exactly.

But, but I did say, didn't I? *Generally?*

That means, of course, that there're exceptions–

Because you know, this world is an abyss, and it's endlessly entertaining.